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# LIFE AMONG THE ABORIGINES

ALSO BY W. E. HARNEY

TABOO

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BRIMMING BILLABONGS

SONGS OF THE SONGMAN (*with Professor Elkin*)





The author with a baby kangaroo at Mataranka

# LIFE AMONG THE ABORIGINES

by  
W. E. HARNEY

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First published in 1957

Dedicated to . . . my black cobbers  
who chanted to me . . . their strange  
philosophy.

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

"To know a people one must live with them" is a saying that applies to the aborigines of this land. Thus out of forty years amidst them has this book been written.

While living and working with the black people this data has been collected out of countless talks, arguments, intrigues, sitting in the dust of their corroborees, in bush and towns or working with them on the seas.

The customs and camp-life have been checked and re-checked as, over the years, this tale was written to give an authentic story of contact between the white man and the black man of the Northern Territory.

W. E. HARNEY

*Alice Springs,  
Northern Territory,  
Australia*

## FOREWORD

by

PROFESSOR A. P. ELKIN

*Emeritus Professor of Anthropology, The University of Sydney,  
Sometime Chairman of the Australian National Research Council*

To read W. E. Harney's book is not so much to learn about the Northern Territory of Australia and its Peoples, as to experience life in that Territory. Anthropologists and historians, by their observations and analyses, help us to understand aboriginal tribal organization and religion, and also the problems arising out of our contact with the aborigines. But Mr. Harney is history and is contact. He knows the aborigines personally over a large part of the Territory to a much greater degree than anyone else. His factual data is reliable, and his interpretations, arising out of his own experience, deserve our respect.

The general reader can be assured that in this book, he is brought face to face with aspects of Northern Territory life during the past three-and-a-half decades as they really have been. Moreover, he will gain from it true and valuable insights into the life and mind of the aborigines. \*

For the historian Mr. Harney's book contains significant source material, and for the anthropologist it will make alive the dry bones of social structure and the requirements of ritual duty. It certainly does this for me, and I know personally most of the people, places and conditions of which he writes. Above all, I have known the author and have collaborated with him for nearly two decades. Therefore his latest publication is doubly welcome to me.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE CONTACT BEGINS

IT is recorded in aboriginal mythology that "Kunapippi"—mother of tribes—made all things in the Dreamtime when she and her band of left-handed boomerang-throwers came out of the north-west into the Northern Territory of Australia.

The myths tell how she came, and the trails that were blazed, but the greatest of the "song-cycles" records how, after she had begotten all the "spirit-children" of the earth, she bade the bearded rainbow-serpent, Djamala, gather them up and show to each the tribal way of life.

By ritual and chants the elders describe how Djamala searched, but unable to find them he swept over the country as a mighty whirlwind that gathered them all up in its dusty embrace and carried them away to form the tribes around.

Then peace reigned in the tribal pattern till 1863, when it was disturbed, a group of "Dyngali" aborigines came out of the kanowna (lancewood) scrub and walked towards their drinking place of "Mudba", then in the process of receiving the new name of "Daly Waters".

Unknowingly they were heading towards John McDouall Stuart's exploring camp beneath a gum tree nearby, but before they reached it a hissing sound, made by one of their women, had them looking at the ground, to see for the first time in their lives the imprint of a horse's hoof on the grey earth.

Many years later, an old aborigine called Badju told me how his people examined the strange marks, being ever careful not to put their own footprints upon them for fear of some magic within that would poison their feet and thus cause them to swell up and rot away with such contact.

Then the old people decided that two men and a lad should follow this new trail; and Badju, the lad, went with his elders.

He laughingly told me how they followed the tracks till they saw a white tent with some strange red people walking about



it and, afraid to go near, they were intently watching the place when one of the elders gave a low click with his tongue and, looking in the direction he pointed, they saw a strange beast. It was one of Stuart's horses, and as they gazed upon it it somehow sensed their presence, for it looked their way and gave a loud snort.

That snort was a signal for the scouts to commence running, and as they came up to the main group of hunters they shouted, "Go for your lives, it is the 'Kutebas' " (their word for devil).

Needless to say, they kept moving away from the evil, and that night, for the first time in their lives, the Djinghali talked about things other than the hunt and the affairs of the camp.

Then some time after this they saw many "Kutebas" come to Mudba with their strange "nantus" (a word in reference to the distended nose of a horse after it has been ridden hard) and, overcoming their fear, they came to know and work for their new masters.

Mudba or, as it was now known, Daly Waters—became a relay-station for the overland telegraph line that stretched from Adelaide to Darwin, and along this line the tribes came into contact with the "Kutebas".

This new-found contact was jealously guarded by the aborigines, for in the white people's goods lay a mastery over the other tribes, and in the struggle for possession came the seeds of disruption and the beginning of a problem to the white people.

"I hope they will soon exterminate themselves and get our aboriginal problem over," exclaimed a resident of Darwin, over seventy years ago, when he heard the "Larrakias" and "Woolnars" fighting over the possession of areas lived on by the natives.

A vain hope, for the aborigines of the town increased as new migrant tribes came in to share in the delights of civilization.

Out of the Mary River plains and the Daly River way they came. Tribe after tribe moved in to weaken and be overcome by a fresh group.

The Government set up Chief Protectors to see what could be done. Basedow, Strangman, Beckett and Cook; each laid down sets of rules, but the towns with their vices and labour problems over-rode them all.

Then in 1939 E. W. P. Chinnery came from New Guinea to set up the Native Affairs Branch with a new deal for the aborigines.

V. J. White was second in charge as Chief Clerk, and the combined staff at that time was seven.

At that time I was driving my own motor-truck for the Department of Public Works, and on being approached to join the Branch I sent in an application for the job.

It was accepted, and in September 1940 I was made a Protector of Aborigines. It was a temporary position, for I had never taken my "leaving certificate", and as I was only a worker with a long record of living in the bush amid aborigines I was not of the Permanents and was not accepted on a permanent basis.

The Native Affairs Branch at that time was located in a place called "Sion House", a large bungalow-type of home and the one-time residence of a deceased station-owner called Felix Holmes.

Picture me then that first day. The air was clear, and already fresh shoots were springing from the leafless trees. The hard dry earth seemed to be taunting the rain-spirit that it could grow things without its aid.

I enter the office to the cursing of a well-dressed woman who is complaining that she cannot get any "niggers" to do her work. "Fancy," I hear her, as she raises her voice louder so that all may hear her complaint, "what we want is the good old days; this new-fangled idea of native welfare is spoiling the blacks." She glared hard at me as I trod by, and rounding the corner of the veranda I asked one of the girl secretaries, "Who's the old girl?"

"Mrs. So-and-so," came back her answer, "always in trouble with natives; won't pay them, in fact won't pay anyone. It's Monday, you know," smilingly from the girl, "washing day, and if she can't get someone to do her washing she'll have to do it herself."

"Then why give her one?" I questioned, and she answered simply, "Her husband's a big shot."

My first job at the office was to become acquainted with the Aboriginal Ordinance and a general reading of the office files. I naturally looked up the heading under which was my own

name, to discover I had been reported for things I had long forgotten, and I was surprised at the number of people who had a grievance to settle with some other person. Reading those reports I discovered that the ones who were loudest in their condemnation of any move regarding native welfare were those who had most to lose by the removal of the natives.

Looking through the police records concerning native misdemeanours, I was amazed to see that during the months of February, March and April few arrests had been made over the years. I inquired of one of the office natives, "Why is this?" and he replied, "Plenty long grass rain time, can't catch them," which explained this point fully.

I read in the Aboriginal Ordinance that "cohabiting with an aboriginal woman was an offence punishable by law". I smiled at that attack on established custom, for I really believe that if a Kinscy report were written about the hundreds of single men who have lived most of their lives with the natives it would be discovered that they were divided into two lots, namely, those who have lived with native women and admit it and those who will not admit it.

Perhaps this ordinance was made to protect the native people, but I have found that, with regard to sex, the aborigines had their own views on this matter.

Their custom of exchanging wives was common. "Changing sweat" they called it. They exchanged, not only wives for a few nights, but, with many tribes, their names and the clothes they wore. The clothes must be full of body-sweat at the time of the giving, for in that act was a complete confidence that neither would use the other's sweat for magical purposes and so cause each other harm.

As regards the lending of wives—a custom which led up to the prostitution of women—it was the natives' belief that to "Hold a man as a friend one must not suppress his sexual desires".

An aboriginal friend of mine once explained it to me. "You see, Bill, if my brother lives with me and he has no wife then I know he will 'do me a trick' by trying to steal after my wife and make trouble." "Well," he explained further, "I am not a 'Bad-head' (jealous) so I send my wife to my brother and we are all happy."

"What about stranger?" I questioned, and his reply, "Stranger and white man all a same, brother," explained the crux of the matter and perhaps the reason for the ordinance.

I have found that native tradition, with its prohibitions and fixed customs, really eliminates those things we know as sin and morals.

The old primitives were really an amoral people. To them sex was the same as drinking and eating, and to their way of thinking, a celibate would be a very strange person indeed. In fact when the white cattle men came and castrated their young bulls, they reasoned that this was why the "good people were the quiet ones".

Where labour was concerned I found that ordinances were required. I have seen peaceful people become unbalanced in their reasoning when deprived of their native labour. Useless to explain to them that the towns were destroying their values and corrupting their morals.

After a few days at office work I was given an assignment to check on all natives living in the town, to try and find out their methods of living and the people who employed them.

In the past I had often worked with many of these native people in the bush, and now, as I wandered amidst the pandanus palms and the black wattles below the police paddock, I met many an old friend who greeted me with joy. How their faces would be covered with smiles; to change slowly as they discovered that I was now of "a different kind".

What a haul I made that day amidst those ne'er-do-wells of Darwin! My first and last big day, for after this beginning my name went forth as one to be avoided.

Past the rifle butts I went, to skirt the edge of mangroves, well marked by little paths that led to aboriginal camps within the dismal depths. What squalor I saw that day, wretched humpies sheltering depressed people, methylated spirit drinkers and glassy-eyed opium smokers. I discovered them all that day, and returned to the office with my list of natives who battered on the town.

Next day I journeyed forth again, but the only natives I saw were those who were lawfully employed. The rest were only black bodies fleeing through the bush, or darting into the little

humpies of the "bush-protectors" who exploited them while shielding them from the law.

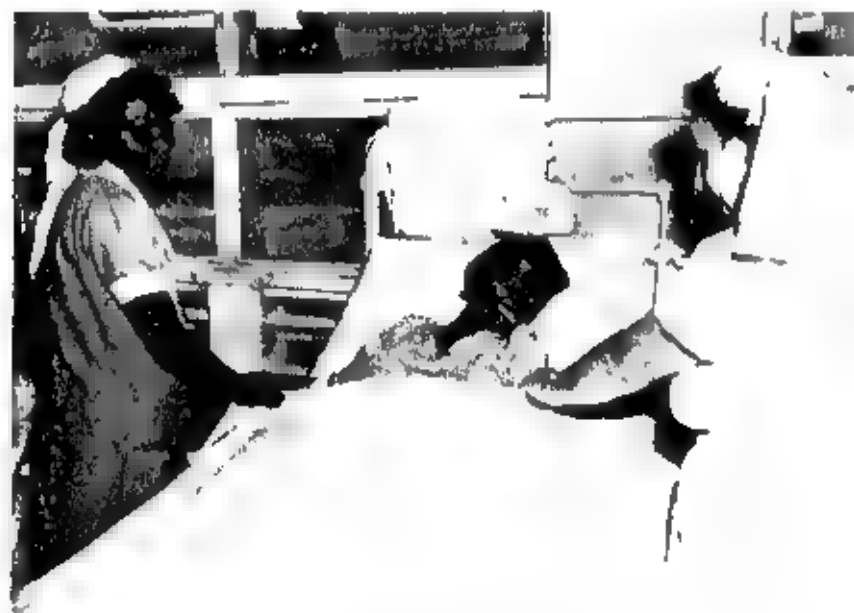
I returned to Sion House and looked down the list of natives I had met during the last few days. Nellie Kumatje, known to the locals as "The Actress"; Crab-billy, Big-toed Nym. Master minds of the Kuramalal tribe; fearless people who had come up the hard way through life. And reading the list I could somehow sense that this job of mine was no easy one. "Native welfare" was contrary to the rules and precedents that had come down from a day when drugs were easy to get and native labour cheap.

I learnt a lot those first few days, but it took me years of work in the towns and bush fully to understand how clever those town aborigines really were.

But I learnt one thing quickly, and after years of being among natives I doubt if there can be any other subject that has produced so many "experts" as those who have ridden to fame on the backs of the old blackfellows. Anyone with a camera and a pencil can record the countless myths, and so become an authority. Knowing the language does not matter, for the patient blackfellow will give the myth-song in the text and then translate it into English. I know many aborigines who have done this, but I have yet to see one written in as the co-author of the work. This land is full of those who know how to "run" blacks! Having trouble with their own families does not deter them, and I know one who ended his "experting" when he himself fled for protection, with his irate dark wife behind him, threatening to "beat him up" if she caught up with him.



Government dental units at work among the natives (see *Chapter III*)



White doctors are slowly displacing the doctor blackfellows of the tribe  
(See *Chapter III*)



The author with the Aborigines. He is known to them all over the Northern Territory as "Bilarney"

## CHAPTER II

### KARAMALAL TRIBE

THE DARWIN OF 1940 was growing away from the old town of over twenty years before. It still had its Chinese shops and their dwellings along Cavenagh Street, with an amazing pattern of byways leading into a tangle of sheds and humpies in the rear.

And just as the true tribesmen knew every track and hunting area in their country so did the nondescript assortment of aborigines—who frequented the town—know these places.

Here—in the midst of smoking joss-sticks, bamboo back-scratchers, camphor-wood boxes and dainty Chinese women—I often met a native I had known in his tribal lands under some name that linked him to his country, to discover that he had dropped the old name and now called himself after the store or the white people he worked for. On town inspections I was ever amazed at the way in which these aborigines had adapted themselves to their new way of life.

In the past the tribal tradition had laid down the way of life, but, driven from their tribal lands when their ritual sites and hunting areas became a grazing area for the stranger's cattle, they drifted in to become servants for the townspeople, and in their new life they became experts in employing tribal taboos to achieve a living in their seclusion.

Their pattern of town life was amazing. Here in Darwin was a complete tribal life, with its laws and rituals. They were heterogeneous people from all tribes, bound together by a common cause into one mass which I called "Karamalal"—the Wargite name for Darwin, derived from the flat, porcelanite rocks that underlie and support the town.

At the time of my becoming a Protector of Aborigines the Karamalal tribe was about 400 strong.

Certain localities in Darwin were the domain of distinct groups of natives who were bound together by their common desire. If opium smokers, they would live in out-of-the-way



dens, with their main hunting groups around opium centres similar to the totemic centres of the tribal lands, and the dope elders were—by virtue of knowledge through initiation with older experts—the people who controlled the opium clan.

And just as at the big tribal rituals, where a tribute must be paid for a favour, so did these old dope-elders levy tribute from the people who sold, as well as those who bought, the opium; and should a buyer or seller refuse to pay out, then word would be sent to the right places and the objector would be in for trouble.

The method of selling opium—I should call it "Cullen", which was the ash of opium after it had been smoked—was foolproof. The buyers would put their money in a known place, and walk on; when they returned along the same footpath a small white packet would be thrown from the darkness at their feet. Picking this up, the addict would go off to enjoy the pleasure of the dope.

The selling of drink, as well as opium, to aborigines was forbidden by law, but the bottles of "taxi-plonk" were planted beside landmarks, such as trees, etc., and after the money was paid over—generally to an aboriginal agent for the real seller—the purchaser was told where to go to receive his present.

The people who trafficked in these drugs were always honest with the aborigines, and this bond of confidence was so great that rarely did they tell who had sold them the stuff if they were arrested with the goods in hand. But let another dealer try to take over the trade and immediately he would be out of business, and in jail, for the old school were bound together by those aborigines who ruled with an iron hand and were remorseless to all who opposed them.

Marriage in the Karamalal tribe was "wrong side"—an aboriginal saying that means "not in line" or not correct by the tribal law. Natives who had been in town for years, and had become efficient servants, were ever in the employ of top Government men, and this employment gave them authority over those in lower-grade jobs. The result was a prior right over any girl who was brought to town through sickness or some misdeemeanour. Claiming her as a tribal wife, a native would find her employment with his boss, and the husband, out bush, would be very lucky indeed if he ever saw her again.

Lack of repatriation caused most of this trouble, and in the battle over disease the medical authorities were ever handicapped in their bush inspections, because the aboriginal husbands and parents would hide their sick wives and children rather than lose them in the towns.

While some of the elders ruled the roost over trade, others became "medicine men" who—of course for a tribute—looked after those sick people who for reasons best known to themselves were anxious to evade the medical authorities. Their cures were of the magic variety, and should they have a stubborn case and death seem imminent, the case would be reported to the authorities and taken to hospital. If the patient died in hospital the white doctors were blamed, but if the patient lived the medicine man rose to a higher niche of fame.

And, strange as it may seem, these same medicine men were at times useful around the hospital by giving a patient the necessary faith to be cured—by removing some magic curse from his body and thus enabling the white doctors to get on with the right treatment.

Labour, too, was often in the hands of certain men who had built up a sort of employment agency. Often have I told people who continually pestered me for native labour to contact these people and they would be supplied.

I soon discovered that native administration was not so much a handling of tribal affairs that had become fixed by tradition over the ages, but of things pertaining to contact since the advent of the white people.

Kinship laws carried a perfect system for marriage, hunting and camp behaviour in the past, but these same laws under contact were the very things that prevented the tribespeople from moving ahead, and the man or woman who wished to advance must first break away from these ties before they could do so.

Let them grow a garden and they soon felt the full weight of kinship ties when, at harvest time, their hosts of relations came to help them—not to gather, but to eat the crop.

Their marriage was controlled by fixed laws, and a breaker of the taboos was a very brave person indeed.

Contact brought in its wake a breaking-up of ties, and a flow of trouble that filled the jails and cluttered up the towns, and

here in Darwin was a result of this contact—a de-tribalized people who had built up another way of life to meet their needs. Their tribal life had been transferred from the trees and lagoons to the streets and houses of this northern town, and as I became aware of it I often wondered if the old elders held their councils in the mangroves of "Ilwada" (railway dam) and in them gave the "song cycles" a new theme and meaning.

## CHAPTER III

### MEDICAL AND SUPERSTITION

PRIOR TO JOINING the Branch I had worked with aborigines on land and sea. Many times I have stood helplessly by as the old medicine men tried hard to cure them of some illness arising from a magic that had laid them low.

To the aborigine all sickness is the result of magic brought on by one of a thousand methods. A person can be "sung" by another who has the magic songs that can cause him to become ill and perhaps die. Every tribe on the mainland has its myths about these invisible wanderers, and whether it be the "Kurans"\* of the Waddaman tribe, the "Muloongoowa" of the Anula, or the "Kaditje" of the Arunta people the pattern is nearly always the same. They are the invisible killers who cast the invisible spears to make the invisible wounds.

A typical myth about them is that of the Waddaman tribe, which records how they approach the hunter and knock two sticks together. Should the hunter answer in their language he can wander on as a free person, but let him be of another tongue and he will be knocked on the head or stabbed with an invisible spear and laid senseless. The "Kurans" then cut open the body and remove the kidney-fat—a substance that gives them their magic powers—and when this has been removed they will retire a little distance away, generally to a dry tree. Once there they will blow through a grass reed, and at the call a black hawk will swoop out of the sky and sew up the wound so that no mark can be seen.

As the black hawk flies away they will blow the reed once more and a white hawk descends to blow life into the victim so that he will arise. And as he comes to life the "Kurans" step out from the tree, to hold out the kidney-fat for the victim to see; and beholding this he falls unconscious to the ground. After a time he awakens, and, forgetting about the event, he returns to camp where he falls sick, and unless the magic is removed by

\* Sometimes called "Moombar".

a "Kuran" of the tribe who has greater magic power than the one who removed the "fat", he will lose his faith and slowly pine away and die.

That is the Waddaman legend, and in it—with a few additions among other tribes—is the aboriginal origin of illness and death, and as each tribe is crammed full of taboos the breaking of each one of these must naturally have evil results.

Women during pregnancy must be careful of large water-holes and springs, that are the permanent homes of the Rainbow serpent which will destroy the unborn child unless she rubs mud over her body before she goes near the water, and during certain periods a woman of the tribe must never give food to a male, for if she did so his eyes would dim, the legs would weaken, and he would stumble and break his limbs.

This Rainbow serpent is ever in their mythology. It is always on the watch for those who disobey the tribal law. It rears its head high during the storm-time and, should a man look upon it, his mother-in-law will have no children to provide him with wives during his old age.

It cannot reproduce its kind, but is born into the world—among the northern tribes—by the union of a crocodile with a young girl. The woman is taken when out hunting, but is never eaten. Legend records the crocodile takes her to his home in the earth, and there she lays eggs that hatch into those small rainbow prisms of light one often sees in the clear bubbling waters of the springs.

The taboos on food during pregnancy are strong, and the breaking of these is fatal.

Snakes do not kill, but they are the reptiles used by the "Kuran" to carry his magic poison and under his spell will bite the "sung" person, and as a result he will die from the magic.

Leprosy—called in Arnhem Land by the Malayan word "koesta"—is said to be brought about by eating food considered taboo. On Bathurst Island I inquired how a certain man had contracted the disease, and was informed he had eaten the flesh of a kangaroo that had been killed by "Iramaru", the wedge-tailed eagle. On the Roper River I saw another sick native, who solemnly told me that he had brought it on himself because he had eaten meat that had been "vowed" by another man. This custom of "vowing" belongs to the law of distribution of

flesh during the hunt. As is common practice, all food is handed out according to relationship, the shoulder to the uncle, the leg to the grandparent, etc., the hunter always receiving the head and the backbone. But in addition he has one choice which is called the "Vow". None can eat this portion; if anyone does then it will turn to poison within him and he will become ill. Hence the leprosy of the sick man who had broken the "Vow".

Small wonder then that the medical side of native administration was difficult. The fear of magic must always be removed before the patient responds to the treatment. Native law demands that to cure one must first find the origin of the magic that caused the disease.

A friend of mine who was in charge of a police station had one of his police trackers laid low with a magic spell called "Yerindi".

"Yerindi" is a power said to be possessed by very clever old men. Through it they can change inanimate objects into living things, and vice versa. An unborn child can be turned into a stone; a wax likeness of another can become the home of a sung person's "shade", and when the wax melts with the heat of the sun that person will die. And associated with this "Yerindi" is the magic poison "Moeir", so deadly that its touch means death.

Tass looked everywhere for the "yerindi" signs. He had natives out looking for flat stones on to which the tracker's likeness would be scratched in the belief that when they broke the "sung" man would pass away. They searched for fires into which pieces of the sick man's clothing could have been burnt, to "cook" the sweat on it so that the smell would entice the "shade" from the tracker's body and he would die as a result.

At last he found the "magic" in a dilly-bag belonging to an old aborigine who was reputed to be a great "Kuran". Carefully he unwrapped the find, to discover an old green rifle shell with some grey-looking powder inside it, and as he pulled it out he laughed at the warning cries of the natives, mangled with the fatal word "Moeir"—the poison that kills by touch.

Laughing at their fears, and to prove it was "Just nothing", he poured a little of the powder on to his finger and put it into his mouth.

The assembled natives waited to see him drop dead, and as he tasted the bitter stuff Tass began to wonder just what was going to happen, cursing himself all the while for a stupid fool.

For about three minutes all was quiet; then the old medicine man spoke, and instantly all was in an uproar. Inquiring why this was, Tass discovered he had been a human guinea-pig, to prove the old man's words that "It only black man's poison; can't kill white man".

During Tass's test the tracker had brightened up a little, but when he heard the old man's words he fell back in a faint and would have died had not Tass locked up the old man and threatened to starve him unless he released the curse from the tracker.

This drastic move made the old man falter, and not long afterwards he ordered the tracker to be brought before him. This was done, and after chanting a "song" into the patient's body, and rubbing it all over with a green bush, he somehow extracted a large green bottle from the sick one, with the remark that he was better.

From that moment, Tass told me, the tracker began to eat and, when finally cured he was ever grateful, not to Tass, but to the old medicine man who had removed the magic "moer" that had laid him low.

Not that magic was the cure-all of *all* things to the aborigines. They knew that hot stones wrapped in wet grass would relieve pain, that mud over sores was a cure in many cases, that breast-milk squirted into children's sore eyes would ease the pain, that bauhinia bark soaked in water was good for fever and spinifex grass in water would relieve colds. These, and a number of other things, have been used by bushmen and proved to be curative.

Tribal taboos were not all superstitions, as a bush friend of mine—and a scoffer of "blackfellow business"—proved to himself when he camped on a "Dysentery Dreaming Place" in the Waddaman tribe, and after a few days ended up in hospital with a complaint caused by tiny hair-like creatures that lived in the water.

Another man I knew went in the water known as an "Itchy Dreaming Place", and was up half the night when a fungus on the reeds and lily stalks caused an itchy swelling on his body.

That foods can be "sung" with the "mocir" was brought home very forcibly to a station owner on the Roper River. He was out riding with his stock plant in the Lemmin River area when they saw and killed a large spotted goanna. Without meat at the time, he wanted to cook and eat it, but was warned by his native stockmen that it was "proper poison".

Thinking they were pulling his leg, he cooked the reptile, and after eating it he nearly died with ptomaine poisoning. For hours he was vomiting, until he became helpless, and the natives carried him for two days until he reached the homestead and some whisky that seemed to relieve his illness. After that bout Jimmy was a confirmed believer in the native taboos.

There is a well-known saying in the bush that "Those who take the old aborigines for fools are greater fools themselves".

The cautionary taboo for children about eating unripe fruit, and the seed-pods of the water-hay, unless first pre-digested by the mother, was a wise move. A missionary on the River discovered this fact, too late, when he ignored the native mother's advice and his own child died as a result.

The attitude of the natives to sickness and its cure was an admixture of logic and truth in a mass of superstition and magic, and one's patience was soon exhausted if one tried to discuss the problem, for a stubborn wall of inertia made one soon realize how deeply rooted was their mentality in this magic.

Whatever one said they would counter. They just could, or would, not understand that "injections prevent disease", saying "Where nothing sickness, why?" They pointed out that "Hospital full up people can't get better", and laughed scornfully when told that T B. and kindred diseases are contagious—for that is the work of magic that even the white doctors cannot cure!

So the debate goes on—you becoming annoyed at their ignorance while they snigger at the stupid whites who cannot understand "blackfellow business".

Matters were made worse by many white people in charge of stations, missions and settlements, who talked freely when they knew a doctor was coming their way on a routine medical inspection. The result was "bush" for the sick ones and a record of a disease-free area in the medical report.



The isolation of lepers aggravated the aborigines' terror of white doctors. Experience in the past had proved to them that these people had never returned and this, with a lack of repatriation in the past of native women, slowed up the medical work. An old man with whom I remonstrated over his sick wife, remarked to me, "Better die with us than in the lands of the strange people."

In pre-Darwin-bombing days the procedure with sick natives was as follows:

An aborigine would be brought in by mission boat or plane, and as the doctor gave him the first examination a Native Affairs Protector would be near to give any advice about the patient's family, his tribal lands, and any other suggestions regarding a similar case.

The patient—knowing the Native Affairs man was there to help them, and realizing also that he knew their country—gained confidence, and once this was gained it was easy to explain to the doctor about the sickness.

To help the patients with their cure the hospitals were visited from time to time and news about their tribal land was given out, and this cheered them up.

Thus slowly, patiently, confidence in the white doctors came upon the aborigines, accelerated at times—as was the case with one doctor I knew—who reverted to the old medicine man's practice of removing a magic stone from a very stubborn patient, and thus gave him faith to receive the hospital treatment.

I also have a suspicion that at one time a doctor—trying to overcome the aborigines' fear of leprosy—brought in an old man who was covered with sores and said to be a leper. After a few months in hospital he was returned to the tribe as cured, with the result that many came in from the hills, where they voluntarily hid themselves, and medical examinations proved that nearly all were suffering from malnutrition brought about by hook-worm.

Patience and understanding—plus the doses of A.P.C. that banished the sick person's headache before he had time to think up its magic cause—had the old medicine man out in the bush hunting his own food, or seeking work in the town.

The advent of the wireless and the Government Flying

Doctor Service opened the way to a greater understanding, and the Northern Territory tackled native welfare in such a way that few aborigines today fear the white sheets and polished bed-stands of the native wards at the hospitals of the "White fellow man".

## CHAPTER IV

### RELIGION AND TRADITION

AS THE MEDICAL side clashed with magic, so did most religious bodies disturb native ritual.

The trouble was that Christianity claimed it is ever right and the others wrong.

I once came upon an old aborigine who had attached himself to a missionary who he thought was completely mad. They had broken down beside the road and, as is common with a lot of these people who trust in the Lord and travel from cattle station to some other destination without food supplies, they were without food when the breakdown occurred.

The aborigine had a grievance, and explained it all to me. "We break down . . . no tucker . . . and this mission man say, 'Where tucker?' . . . So I make spear from tree . . . sharpen it on stone and I go out and kill kangaroo . . . then this man say, 'Where match?' so I make fire with stick—blackfellow way—and I cook this one kangaroo and give some to him . . . then him talk, 'No more eat till we thank God for this one food' . . . him proper cranky fool."

The aggrieved black man asked me to "explain why it was that after he had done everything to get the food this man had asked him to thank 'Nother one man'".

"Can't make it out," he muttered, "must be him mad."

The old man had reason to think that way, for aboriginal belief in the matter of food is that only at their main increase rituals each year can a person perform those duties which give strength through a communion with the "food spirits" that control all these things. Their myths tell of hunters who were hungry and who, by asking the "food spirits" for help, were stricken with some curse as a result. The legend of Yumbi—near Newcastle Waters—records how a native hunter was crushed to death by snakes when he dared to ask for one at this snake increase centre.

Religious intolerance on the side of many white people, and

aboriginal politeness coupled with a complete inability to stand up for their rights and tell the others to "go to blazes", is the thing that breaks down tribal ritual and hastens the spread of other beliefs, aided by the fact that "a bad tribesman is always a good Christian", and vice versa.

Old Birbir—an old aborigine of the Darwin tribe—was a great man, and I asked him once what religion he really believed in. The patient old fellow pondered over my question awhile, then remarked, "White man God right, but black man God right too."

When I questioned him as to why he always led his people in the native songs and rituals, yet on each Sunday he attended the white man's religious services, he explained, "White man came to our camp and he stood all alone and sang about his God . . . nobody listen to him as he stood all alone . . . then I said to my friends, 'Have you no shame . . . this white is sorry for us and sings about his God to us . . . let us go and sing with him and make him happy'." Birbir finished his story simply and with finality, "Well, Bill, we went to make him happy; now he can't let us alone."

These "Men of God" were generally the untrained people who had received the "Word" because of some sickness, and in their zeal came up to teach the Birbirs who were polite enough to listen to them. To these people all donations they received were the direct gifts of God, and a proof that they were in favour, the donor was but the "instrument of God's will" to shower favours upon them.

One such explained to me—with much detail and interjections of "Glory be to God"—how he was once short of benzine to go on an "errand of mercy", and as he prayed for "God's gift" a passing motor truck stopped outside his house with a broken axle.

The look of adoration in his eyes—as he told how the people abandoned the vehicle and gave him the benzine—was a sight that made me grieve for the natives under his care, and I wondered, as he told the story, just what the donors of the benzine would have said had they heard that they had been favoured as the "instruments of God's gifts".

Some of my best friends were trained missionaries who tackled the aboriginal question with a deep psychological un-

derstanding, and these people were never deluded by the old saying that the natives were "just children".

A Father I knew would take the old pagans (unchristian ones) aside as the others went to church, and many were the amusing stories he told me of how they debated the myths of their tribe.

One debate—always in the tribal language—was about the all-seeing eye of a sky-spirit called Pupinooowarra, who would rush out of the sky at night to destroy the evil-doers of the tribe, and slowly this theme turned to the God of the Christians.

Patently the old men listened as the Father explained that God could see all things and, emboldened by the intent looks on their faces, connecting the Christian God with their own, he thrust home his main reason for the debate—adultery among the women when their husbands were away in Darwin.

"In the jungle," he told them, "God looks down as these people commit that sin . . ." He got no further, for an old elder interrupted. "You wrong, Father, if your God is as good as you tell us He is, He would be too ashamed to look."

The whole trouble over religion was that each one was far apart. The black man, in his own beliefs, is a very religious person. A Christian Father once said to me, "If we could but bring over their faith to our doctrine they would all be saints."

Aboriginal ritual belonged to the land it grew up in; it was their will to live, and as such was ever bound up with their hunting life and camp behaviour. Yet most Christian aborigines I have met are always proclaiming that the unchristian ones are doomed to the regions of eternal fire, whilst they will look down upon them from a wonderful dreamland above. One zealot even told me that Christian blackfellows would be supplied with beds "all-a-same white fellow", and "nother blackfellow sleep on ground proper rubbish way".

The aborigines have—for centuries—been in a backwash of time, and in it they evolved a perfect system—"the elimination of effort". They hunted their food by studying the weakness of the creatures they stalked during the hunt, and the flowering of trees and the winds told them when to hunt that prey. Their "song cycles" about their ritual centres explained to the initiated where things were to be found, and so long have these people been in this land that every natural landmark in the

Northern Territory is incorporated in those "song cycles". Everything was laid out in a perfect pattern until we strangers arrived; and then it broke down.

Their system of marriage by responsibilities through relationships supplied security for the aged, and controlled the distribution of food caught during the hunt. A perfect system in the past; yet let a man under "contact" try to better himself—as I saw recently when one appeared as the star actor in a film—and he is in trouble. Robert was ever nervous about pictures appearing in the southern Press associating him with the girl star of the film. He ever told me he was thankful that the girl came from Alice Springs, a long way from his tribe, for should she have been of a tribe known to his people then things would have gone off with a bang!

Quickly they would have determined her marriage subsection, and if it had been in that of someone who was taboo to him he would have been in for trouble, for to them the moving pictures are real, and the players are in earnest.

Tradition ruled all with a fixed law. Without the word in their language for "obey" they naturally had no head-man who ruled as a chieftain. A man was only the head-man of his sister's child. A grandmother was the expert relating to her grandchildren. The father-in-law was the guardian of his son-in-law in all tribal disputes.

For a black man to become a boss, in the white man's sense, he must first break away from the tribal code. I have even known a quarter-caste who was educated in the South, but when he returned to the mission station which had sent him down, he was unable to give orders to the tribespeople, because they considered he was in the tribal pattern and therefore under the tribal law.

Some people tried to break down this code, but it always brought trouble in its wake. I well remember an aboriginal couple who were married "Christian way in church". The woman was not aware that the union was a fixed one—not as in the tribe, where the people can become divorced by mutual consent.

The marriage irked her so much that she decided to break it up and take to herself another man of her tribe. Her method was simple and ingenious.

She became the friend of another native man I knew and, unknown to him, used him as a means of arousing her husband to such a jealous madness that he crept upon the man, who he thought was his wife's lover, and killed him with a spear.

I found it all out too late, and even then I could not stop the self-satisfied smile on the real killer's face, as her husband went to jail whilst she returned to her true lover.

Within the dusty files of Native Affairs are cases of many murders, and reading the bare details I often wondered what was the background of the real thing.



A girl of a Dreamtime race





A songman of the tribe

## CHAPTER V

### THE WADDAMAN TRIBE

**I**N THE MIDST of my re-education by members of the Karamalal tribe I was sent out on a patrol of the Victoria River area, over 300 miles to the westward, but was soon recalled over a murder by aboriginal youths on the Daly River.

The information was crammed with details about an "old woman cult" that had caused the trouble, a cult that had been introduced into the Daly River by a native called "Big-foot Paddy"; and as I travelled eastward through the high red gorges of Bambaran, near where the "Lightning brothers" of the "Rain-dreaming" look down from the painted rock ledges on to the Victoria River valley below, I thought of Big-foot Paddy's Waddaman people who once lived in this land.

The Bambaran Gorge is a mass of red hills brooding over the green pandanus river below, and just over from the painted caves was the one-time homestead of a great cattle-man called Jim Campbell. His life was as disturbed as that of the aboriginal people around him, for it was from this spot that the Northern Territory police chased, but failed to catch, him on a trail that ended with his death by blackfellows' spears on the King River, near Goulbourn Island.

His cattle-station was the centre of the Waddaman tribe. A bare thirty years ago they were numerous and strong, yet only a few of these people exist today with their rich and complete tribal ritual.

To understand the aborigines one must know their ancient way of life, and the Waddaman, as I knew it, was as complete as it was simple.

In the "Dreaming" (Boaradja) their spirit shades came with the Earth Mother "Kunapippi" from the westward, and with her came the culture heroes who helped her to form the land. As the "Old woman" her profane name—she danced at certain places, and as she did so the "spirit children" came from her body to people the earth. The mighty Rainbow

serpent Djamala—who was one of her band—would look behind, in sorrow, as she danced, and as he did so there arose on that exact place the totemic centres of the tribe. It was he who was commanded to scatter the tribes, and he it was who first brought children into the world by spearing the bag of blood near a girl's heart as she reached puberty, so that the "spirit children" would heed the sign and be born into the world.

With the "Old woman" came "Mininne", the people of the "Dingo" totem, and it was they who introduced the practice of sub-incision, and by producing stone knives from a pocket in their ears gave the tribes this useful weapon of the hunt.

The world at that time was flat, but a man of the "Lizard" totem broke a tribal law by torturing a dingo, and in its distress the stricken creature spoke the Waddaman language, and as a revenge a flood of water came out from sunrise way to sweep over the earth.

The Lizard people fled in dismay, but they were soon overtaken as they tried to drink at a pool, and the onrushing waters engulfed them so that they are today those pandanus palms that line the waters of their lands. Those statuary antbeds of the swamplands are other people who were transformed, and the Baobab trees with their upright limbs are others who cried for help in those dark days.

But the present Waddaman people were saved, for the lands they respected rose with them above the waters, and as they rose the creatures of the country fled there to safety.

For days the water rose with the land, until that final day when a man cut off the index finger of his left hand, and the blood—sweeping out from the wound—covered the waters so that the floods died away, to leave the hills and rivers of that area.

Then came men of the tribe who invented useful things, and to commemorate this they were transformed into a creature associated with their totems.

Thus did the plain-kangaroo (Wolajaru) become the owner of the Buran (boomerang) 'Twas he who made the first one, and the legend records how he threw it in a battle with Kuree—the blue-tongued lizard and the inventor of the Kowari (shield)—and made the grassy plains around.

Their religious belief is that the "Moria" (shade spirit) was

conceived by the "Earth Mother" in the "Boradja". It was colourless and sexless, and when conceived as a spirit child into its mother through a dream of its father shall remain in that "camp" until born into the world as a "shade spirit" covered with a "skin" (flesh) and thus become a living form once more.

At the birth of a child the grandmother is notified, and, thoroughly examining the child, she can tell by its "Marbun" (birth-mark) which person in another life had that mark. Once this is established, the child becomes the reincarnated person, and as such will be given the dead one's name, marry the same reincarnated wife, and travel along the same "Djarp" (dream-time path) as the other.

And when death comes, the body is put into a stage in a tree around which the base has been cleared, and this clearing is frequently examined by an elder, who looks for those magic signs that will convey to him which person—if any—laid the dead one low.

After this "inquest" the bones of the dead one are collected and the burial rituals are held.

The burial ritual is full of meaning, but the main idea is to get everything "clear", so that the "shade spirit" can wander once more on to the "Djarp" finally to enter the abode of all the "shade spirits" of the dead, there it is judged by the main spirit "Wolgaru". Legend records that he has long ears and sharp fang-like teeth and—ever guarded by his two black dogs, known as "Djaranin"—he judges each of the dead shades who come before him. Should one have "a bad mouth" (meaning a bad past) it is "roasted"—not to destroy, but to purify it so that it will "lose its sense of direction" (loss of memory) and return renewed once more along the path of life, to be re-born.

And as this spirit child wanders about seeking its mother to be reborn, it may enter an animal—not as with other forms of reincarnation where the "shade spirit" becomes the animal as a form of penance, but by passing into the live animal for protection, and should a native vomit from eating food when out hunting they will know it was "spirit children food" that made him ill, for that is taboo. A custom analagous to this reincarnation and taboo on food is the fact that I have never

yet seen an aborigine kill or eat an animal he has kept for a pet, for they believe that contact with them has made it sacred and so it cannot be eaten.

At times these "spirit children" become caught up in a whirlwind—said to be the Rainbow serpent's head looking above the earth as it crawls below the ground—and when this occurs near a native camp it is common for the women and girls to beat tins and shout warnings to the monster that the spirit children within its whirl are taboo to them.

The full story of the Kunapippi ritual is too complicated to tell. The song cycles go on for days, and a part of them is the "Karawadi", a most sacred word that must never be mentioned with food; if this was done no self-respecting woman would dare to eat it, and in olden days to do so would mean a swift death. (I discovered later, on my return to the Daly River, that this was one of the reasons for the murder of the women in that area.)

The central object of the Kunapippi ritual is the "Nan-garu" (mother place), and in it a hole is dug to represent the reproductive organs of the old "Earth mother".

Now when a youth is about fourteen years of age he is pounced upon one night and, to the whirl and whirring of "bull-roarers", he is carried away into the darkness to the wails of the women, and a general trilling as a signal that they hear the old mother's cry.

The crying lad is carried to the ring place, and once there he is given a "bull-roarer" with the remark that "he must not be afraid as it is only a piece of wood with a hair belt attached", but he is further warned that he must never allow a woman of the tribe to see him whilst he has it.

The elders return to the camp and explain to the wailing women that the boy has been swallowed by the "Old woman", and he is now called an "Inside".

I must digress a little to explain that all aborigines of the Kunapippi cult have two "shade spirits", one called "the shade of the flesh" and the other "the shade of the wood". "The shade of the flesh" is the eternal Dreaming that ever lives with a person while they are alive. The "shade of the wood" is the spirit of the bull-roarer. And these two only unite at the ritual of Kunapippi and at death.

The period a youth is "inside" is determined by how kind he was as a lad. Should he have been kind to the aged he will be treated accordingly, but let him be a spoilt lad and he is shown no mercy, for it is the Kunapippi ritual that shows to all the total obedience to the tribal law, and the youth who goes in as a radical will emerge as a disciplined man with great respect for the elders.

Once "clear" of the Kunapippi the youth is called an "Outside", and with that title his bullroarer is buried in the "mother place" where its "wood shade" departs to the place of Wolgaru to await the coming of its other half, and with that final event the "Outside" takes his place in the tribe and shares its responsibilities.

An interesting point in this "Old woman ritual of regeneration" is in the fact that should a lad die before he has been made an "Outside" his bones are collected at death, to be carried by his mother in the belief that the "shade spirit" will hover about the bones and be reborn to her in the future. But once made an "Outside", if the lad dies he will pass through the common death ritual.

The Waddaman kinship system—similar to other tribes in this area—is that all people belong to a totem which is divided into four parts called "skins". They are really "generation levels"—called by anthropologists "subsections". The four levels came about from the obvious fact that—with a people who believe in reincarnation—the fifth generation was so rarely seen, and they came to believe their great-great-great-grand-mother was also their reincarnated mother, and as such was the body out of which they came.

A "skin" could only unite with its proper marrying "skin", and "only from my mother's skin could my skin be born". Thus a Noala marries a Djanama and begets a Djunari male and Nungari female. The Nungari begets a Nungala, who in turn begets a Nahyeri who is the mother of a Noala.

The marriage pattern is simple when looked at from the aboriginal angle, for they are ever with it, but when it becomes "wrong side" then all sorts of complications arise; explained—in myth—as introduced by "Djaladjbung" (tongue-breaker), who fought with his brother over women and then went into the sky to live. He is ever "wadji-wadji" (wrong side), the

natives say, "and persists in travelling along different paths as he crosses the sky during the seasons".

The women of the Waddaman tribe have their secret meetings called "Udadju", "Yowalyu" and "Djarada", cults introduced from different surrounding tribes. In them—so I have been informed, for I was a man and therefore debarred—they paint themselves with blood and feathers similar to the men's rituals, and in these places the strange women and young girls are taught the tribal taboos. The Djarada songs are full of erotic chants connected with the Kurakun (smoke hawk), and as the women dance their secret rituals the males of the tribe wander around—some distance away—swinging a "Lunyin"—a small and profane type of bullroarer said to be connected with the "wrong-side moon". And as this "Lunyin" gives out its whooping cry into the night the women say it is the voice of "Big-cap" calling them to satisfy their sexual desires.

Such—in brief—is the tale of the Waddaman people. And as I travelled through the Bambaran Gorge I looked for their smoke fires but saw them not. Their hunting days are over, for just a few remain around the cattle station homesteads west of the Katherine township. Just a few, who sing—now and then—the myths of past days.

The hills of "Wahdohi" respond no more to the "song-man" as he re-paints the rain-conception place of the Lightning Brothers and "sings" up the rain, and no more will we listen to the songs of Kananda and hear how the "Frog-men" were turned into stones nearby. Dead too are the "song-cycles" that took weeks to record; epic chants taught by elders to the male initiates at night by taking them to the sacred places and chanting the lines over and over into the youth's body and head until he became saturated with the theme and, forgetting everything else, he repeated the chanting of the elders.

When this occurred the elders would pause to listen, and if he was out in one word or syllable they would chant once more until he was word-perfect. So each line was learnt, and after years of teaching, the one with the best memory would become the "Song-man" to carry on the traditions of the tribe.

All these memories passed through my head as I drove along

the Victoria River. Drove back to the Karamalal tribe in Darwin, into whose ranks some of these Waddaman had drifted; and from there I was going out to investigate a cult murder which had its origin in a member of this tribe through whose empty lands I was now motoring.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE SUNDAY BUSINESS

THE ABORIGINES of the Daly River are a group of tribes called the "Brinkin people", a name given to them by outside tribes after the long brinkin throwing-sticks they always used to hurl their light bamboo hardwood-tipped spears.

Most of the original tribes who lived and hunted on the eastern banks of the river died away when they came in contact with the thousands of Chinese who built the railway line from Darwin in the 'eighties, and as they passed away other tribes migrated across the stream to take their place in the onward move towards the towns, with ultimate detribalization and obliteration.

The tribe in the van about 1940 was the "Nulukwonga", and as they were originally employed around the mulluck heaps of the copper mines they became known as the "Mulluck-mullucks".

To the west of the river are the "Moil people" of the "Swamp plains", and behind them are the "Muranbata", who have been arrested in the onward march by the Catholic Fathers who have gathered them together at the Port Keats Mission.

The Brinkin people were uncircumcized and without generation levels in the beginning. There was a simple belief that centred around some object of veneration in their tribal lands, a country rich in game, and on it they lived in security until other migrant tribes from the south moved in with the cult of Kunapippi from the Waddaman tribe.

Slowly the ritual of the "Old woman"—with its roaring bull-roarers and sacred taboos—crept into the scene. In its original home the Kunapippi ritual had tribal authority and its strong taboos were respected and feared by the uninitiated, but, leaping ahead with the advent of the white man, it became a serious menace to those who used it freely and without thought of its taboos.

Its cult-name was changed and it was given a new title of "Big Sunday", meaning, of course, "Very sacred".

The original function of the "Big Sunday" taboo was to place certain foods or localities under a strict taboo—always done by the tribal elders—and this was a useful means of controlling the impulsive youths of the tribe, or a way of conserving food near the camp so that it was easily accessible to the aged and weak.

All this was good custom back in those tribes where the ritual originated, but here on the Daly River it brought chaos; for the youths of the Brinkin people could see in its ritual and secrecy a means of obtaining sweethearts, and satisfying their other desires by using these taboos.

Towards the middle of 1940 a native woman was killed by four youths of the Daly, and when arrested by the constable in charge of that area they gave, as an excuse for the deed, the story that she had been destroyed because she had crossed a piece of ground which had been made sacred by the "Sunday, or Old woman ritual".

In the past, crime did not exist among the aborigines. People died, or were killed because some magic had brought about their death. Bitten by a snake, gored by a savage bull or buffalo, fallen from a tree or killed by some weapon—all were the result of some magic that caused the victim's eye to dim, his leg muscles to tighten so that he could not run away from the danger. In one tribal inquest I witnessed, they searched for the man who had "sung" the victim's shade into a white truck-driver's body, and had then used that same magic to turn the truck over and so kill the deceased.

As magic is the cause of all these crimes, then they must be "made clear" when the tribespeople gather during certain rituals. It is laid down in tribal law that "when people gather during certain increase rituals their first ceremony shall be the settlement of grievances". Once these have been completed and all is "clear", then the other rituals of initiation and increase are sure of success.

The "Makarata" (thighbone) and "Nugwearipa" (throw to miss) of Arnhem Land, where the natives have spears thrown at them as a form of "trial by combat", belong to this ritual fighting.

The idea behind this ritual fighting is that should a person be guilty, the victim's shade, or spirit, will guide the spear or

boomerang towards the person who was the cause of his death and he will himself be wounded as a result. The law lays down that "where blood flows then an equal blood flow must come from the accused".

But suppose all these things have happened at the ritual fighting and all is "clear", and the white man's law steps in, what then?

From the aborigine's point of view the thing has been cleared and a re-opening of the case is only the result of "white man business", and wrong.

To overcome this thing the Native Affairs Branch decided that all crimes should be investigated on the spot. If it was discovered that someone in the tribe was breaking into tribal authority then that person would be removed to another area as a corrective punishment, but if it were found that the crime was premeditated and brutal, then the white man's law must take over the case. The idea of protection was not to protect the scoundrels but to protect the law-abiding aborigines from those who would disturb the tribe.

For this purpose the Director of Native Affairs, E. W. P. Chinnery, decided to investigate the Daly River case on the spot, and I went with him on the job.

The road from Darwin to the Daly River leads southward through Stapleton, then turns westward over the Adelaide River hills for a further distance of fifty miles. And as our car moved over this rough bush road we passed by stony hills covered with messmate trees and low scraggy bush, yet in the valleys we crossed running streams alive with yabbies that hid among the waving water-grass. Here and there along the banks of these running creeks one could see tall jungle trees growing from a soil rich with leaf mould, and looking on to this varying land, with its wet and dry areas, I thought of the old bush saying that "Where water flows life grows".

The secret of this land is water and markets, and some day—perhaps when the south lands have been laid waste by greed and soil erosion—these unwanted areas will be used to supply the needs of those who will appreciate its worth.

Meditating on the uselessness of the land, I was aroused as our car pulled up beside a creek. The driver took us over to a

lonely tree beside a small lily pool, and beneath the tree we read on a gravestone that here was the last resting-place of one Noltenious who was murdered by natives in 1884, and that this stone had been erected to his memory by Basedow.

Looking at that memorial of dark blue stone, it seemed strange to me that Basedow—geologist and anthropologist—had been on this very spot, and had erected this stone over a man who had been destroyed by the people whom he wrote so highly about. Perhaps it was his tribute to a great misunderstanding. Poor Noltenious, he had been speared some miles away, and escaping the final death blow of his attackers, had staggered away to die in this lonely spot.

Returning to our car, we shortly afterwards passed by the lily-lined billabong named in honour of the dead man, and a little further on we were at the Daly River copper mines where the prospecting party had camped upon that fatal night so long ago.

The crudely-cut tombstone of one Shollett was under the brow of a hill nearby, and we read on its weatherbeaten face that he had been "Mured by blacks." And as I stood by that lonely grave, an old aborigine of that part came up and stood beside me. His face was as wrinkled as the scarred hills around us, his body twisted and gnarled as the coolabaks that grew on the blacksoil flats nearby. The trees around sighed in the breeze as he told me, in his quaint pidgin, the story of his youth when the tribes were strong, and as he spoke I pictured the scene on the night of that tragedy . . .

A blazing campfire among the trees, with the horses of the tired adventurers jangling their bells as they fed on the grasslands nearby. Then came yells and spears as the tribesmen attacked the intruders. Soon all was quiet again, the strange quiet of the Australian bush—rustling leaves, the call of a night bird, the wail of a dingo, or perhaps the mimicking voice of an aborigine as he called to his friend. Silence except for the stifled moans of poor Noltenious as he dragged himself over the stones and across the grassy flat below while his mate, who had escaped, galloped to bring help to his dying friend. And as his horse's hooves pounded the earth they gave a message to all that the "war was on".

The rescuing party arrived some days later with some medi-

cine in the pockets of their dusty shirts, and a prayer on their lips as they buried Noltenious beside the hly lagoon. Prayer may have been on their lips, but hatred was in their hearts as they clutched their guns and went out in search of their foe. Now only these graves remain and, above us on the ridge's spur, the ruins of the Daly copper mines. Shollett and Noltenious are remembered by their graves and the ruins above, but I see no monuments over the countryside to mark the resting-places of the tribesmen who fell because they did not understand that it is murder to kill those who would destroy the sacred places of their land. A sad story, both sides of it . . .

I turned away from that grave at the urgent toot of the motor-horn, and moving off I pressed a "little bit bacca" into the old black man's hand, and left him to the land of his fathers who once flourished so well in these parts. The last I saw of him, as our car moved away, was a black body hobbling through a dense growth of horchound weeds that were also a heritage of the white people. Turning to wave at him, I saw a sleek domestic cat, that had gone wild, speed through the grass with a bird in its mouth; and I could only shudder at the thought of what does happen when the indigenous plants and creatures of this land are despoiled by the uncontrolled pests that prey upon them.

After another seventeen miles of travel we halted outside a bungalow type of building with a sign that read "Police Station", and as we pulled out our swags from the luggage carrier we were greeted by an old friend of mine, Constable Tom Turner. Mrs. Turner was by his side as they stood near the gate that led us into a garden plot surrounding the "Station".

Everything was neat and tidy; rows of vegetables and flowering plants gave a vivid foreground to the house. They welcomed us in, and after the usual drink of tea we walked over to the jungle-lined bank of the Daly River and gazed upon that broad sheet of water before us.

Upstream, to the left of us, the running water was winding through a bed of yellow sand. Large paper-bark trees lined its banks and, about a mile beyond, a limpid green sheet of water reflected some red hills. In the distance we could see a rugged

line of mountains that told of those days when men searched those parts like ants, seeking treasures that would give them security in bad times.

Now and then someone would record a "find" of gold and tin to keep them wandering, but it was the broad river that ever attracted both black and white. The lily-covered lagoons where . . .

"The wild birds rose up at the sound of a gun  
And the waters dropped a foot in the silver billabong.  
With ducks, geese and feathers, you could not see the sun,  
Down on the Daly River, O."

Thus people came, and lured by the beauty of the land, they tried to wrest a living from its waters and rich jungle soils.

## CHAPTER VII

### DALY RIVER O

THE DALY RIVER's past is full of incident: murders, mines and missionaries whose hopes were washed away in floods of water and vice.

A peanut farming centre today, yet its first experiment in farming came about when the Patagonian Government in South America decided to force its Welsh farmers to speak the national language. The Welsh flew up in arms and decided that, rather than lose their national character, they would leave *en masse*, and in order to carry out this threat their leaders negotiated with the Billy Hughes' Government and asked that they be allowed to come to Austraha.

To place them, land on the Daly River was surveyed into farms, and the immigrant home was built to receive them. Mr. Archbold of H. C. Sleigh Steamship Line went to bring them over to Austraha, but arriving there it was discovered that the Patagonian Government had relented and allowed the Welsh farmers to remain. But rather than lose face with the Australian Government they gathered up a lot of their nationals—who and what they were did not matter—and these they shipped off.

The trip was quite an event, and as a means of quelling any riots Constable Bridgeland—then a police cadet of the South Australian Police—sailed on the ship from Adelaide to Darwin.

On arrival at Darwin they found that many of the migrants had never been on the land as farmers, and these became labourers on the railway line from Pine Creek to the Katherine River. Other people were found for the Daly River scheme, but in a country without markets they could not sell their products and their hopes faded away. Brooms, made from their growing mullet, only swept out their own homes and, realizing their mistakes yet determined to remain, they only planted those things useful to their own needs.

The ruins of many old homes among weeds, mango and lime

trees tell the story, and during the latter part of the year the scarlet and yellow blooms of the poincianna and cassia remind the questioning traveller that here lived people vibrant with hope and energy. Hopes that died as the markets decreased—and an increase in the multitudes of wallabies that came from the river jungles to scratch and glean the newly planted gifts of the strangers, and having eaten their fill would scratch their distended bellies as they stared at the farmers who toiled so hard to produce so little.

But many years of toiling and living on the land without monetary gain had developed—among the Riverites—a system of barter that used various standards of value according to the outside demand, and during the war years the standard of value was the "baramundi" fish which lived in the stream and billabongs that marked the ancient river-bed. A worthy opponent here for the tough Riverites, for this giant perch only gave itself up to the fisherman who knew its moods.

Reaching a weight of over forty pounds, with cutters behind the gills that could slice through a net if allowed to run; endurance that enabled it to twist a line until it tore the hook from its mouth if not fished properly, no scavenger of the waters here, but a delicate epicure that only feeds on live bait, and only takes that food during certain "runs" of the tides.

The chief financial "tycoons" of the war years were one Brother Woods—the Brother was tacked on to his name because he was kind-hearted—and his mate Tom Vegar. Their trading camp, with its freezer, was under a large banyan tree a few yards away from the jungle-lined river bank. They supplied the fishing lines and hooks to the Brinkin natives, and these people used their hollow-log canoes as a means to catch the fish. The bait used was the "giant prawn" gathered by the natives from Brown's and smaller lagoons along the river flats, and with this tempting baramundi-bait the day's work would begin.

To catch the baramundi is an art. No selecting a shady tree, then casting out the line at any spot and begin pulling them in. The fish only run when conditions are right, and knowing this, the native fisherman rests under the tree until he reads the sign, and with nature's signal a restlessness is on, and as fishing begins so do the finances for the Daly River barter system.



The white traders pay the aboriginal fishermen by weight, and after cleaning, the fish were stacked in the freezer until enough had been gathered for the seventy-mile truck run to the Adelaide River. At Adelaide River the fish were sold by weight, and with a credit from the fish goods were purchased for the banyan store at the Daly River.

Out of this store came the credit for the farmers, who had no funds at that time. Food supplies meant other natives coming in to work, so peanuts were planted and other industries commenced. That, in brief, was the basis of the river barter system—black people catch the standard value and out of that barter industry begins. And a depression on the river is only brought about by a failure of the barter system or heavy floods that sweep away the growing crops.

At the time of our visit over the murder cases, the Riventes comprised Risdale, whose tobacco farm was speckled white by little conical coverings of bark that were used to protect each tender shoot from the sun. Risdale—who has a manufacturing licence—was "all out" on tobacco talk of "leaf" and "blend", and showed us his curing shed which comprised the "factory"—a galvanized iron building sheltering primitive presses made from screws, weights and levers of his own design.

Further down, on the other side of the river, we went to Parry's farm, where the old man's sons still work the peanut farm he left them when he passed away. They told us their farm was on the site of a Jesuit Mission that was abandoned years ago. Below them was George Taylor's peanut farm; across from him and over the river were the peanut farms of the Knowles family; then came Charlie Joe's and Jimmy Pan Quee. A little further down was Skinny Davis—now deceased—with, nearby, the Woods-Vegar trading store, and Charlie Darge whose house is under the shade of large mango trees planted by missionaries in the past.

After our visit to the Riventes, Constable Tom Turner led us to Brown's Lagoon, the site of the "Sunday business" killing affray, and there, on the spot, we visualized the crime and heard the tale from one, old Matthew, who claimed he had been baptized by the Fathers of the long-deserted Mission. His tale was a strange one. . . .

There were four lads in the crime—mere youths who had



The tribal elders chant the song cycles of tradition (see Chapter V)



A girl child of the tribes



Group of young Aborigines



Aborigines in the past acted as crew aboard the pearling luggars  
(See Chapter XI)

been sold the "magic" of "Big Sunday" by "Big-foot Paddy"—and with this new-found power they believed they were "strong" in hunting and love. One of the lads was a sweetheart of an old man's wife, and had tried his magic on her and it had failed to attract her. The woman—so they said—had sheltered under the white man's law and defied them by tramping (against the warning of the old men) over the taboo ground. Then came death. Not savage and secretly as in a brutal crime, but by spears thrown at one who would profane the sacred laws of the "Old woman".

We tried to discover the master-mind behind the scenes, but at our promptings a change came over the people around us and their faces registered blank stupidity at our questions. Someone in that crowd of natives around us at Brown's Lagoon had urged the lads on, but that one's power was great enough to seal all ears to our questions. They just would not understand.

This method of obtaining strict obedience has ever puzzled me, it is something outside our understanding.

I have known cases where young lads—ten years old—were placed under a taboo of speech because they were suspected of seeing some sacred secret ritual, and that silence would be observed completely until the lad was passed through an initiation ceremony that taught him the idea behind those sacred things. Great must be the power behind it all.

And that, I afterwards discovered, was a general rule with all sacred killings. The "Top-men" were strong enough in tribal authority to seal the lips of those who knew. The investigator could talk about other things and he would be answered fully, but let him get to the main subject and a veil of sheer stupidity would come over the faces of those who were being questioned.

Yet this same tribal authority that prevented us from getting behind the "Sunday killing" was the power that controlled the tribes in past days. An elder's word was law, and those who took it away—generally by the introduction of religion, or by depriving the tribe of its ritual centres—realized their error when the youths took over and controlled the tribe.

Those elders of past days were great men; they were the repositories of knowledge and wisdom. They resisted other

religions, not because they resented them but because, as a wise missionary said to me when I asked him about an old man who sat outside his church as others of his tribe prayed inside, "He does not wish to be a Christian because he has too much tribal lore to lose by going inside."

The Daly River incident had its origin in "contact" and it was the beginning of the end, and all our questionings on the spot just led us nowhere.

The case came on in Darwin in the old stone court-house that overlooked the harbour, and as I walked up the stone steps leading from the footpath I saw a knot of native witnesses talking and peering at the stone wall of the building. Walking over, I discovered their interest had been aroused by a crack in the wall that was full of little native-bees who had built a nest somewhere within. At the height of their interest a policeman came and took them away, informing all others the case would soon begin.

The Daly River case was a long-winded affair; full of misunderstandings, as the lawyers on both sides tried to make some sense out of it all. People came and went, and at long last the jury filed in with a verdict of "Guilty" and, as was usual with all tribal murders, a Native Affairs Protector was allowed in the box to talk on behalf of the prisoners and ask for mitigation of the sentence through tribal custom. The Judge consented, so I entered the witness box.

I was scared at first as I entered the box, but looking at the late Judge Wells—who gave me a smile of encouragement—I took heart and told the story of the "Sunday business"—a tale of how the old men of the tribe are the ones behind the scenes, and the youths but obey the tribal law. But I knew that I must talk only on the evidence given in the Court, the rest was not permissible, and the real truth of the "Sunday business" was under the secret ban.

I looked at the witnesses in Court; some for, others against, the accused. My gaze shifted to the four prisoners who were staring over the Judge's head at a carved and painted crest of a lion and unicorn looking at each other over a crown of gold. To them the case was nothing, for they had obeyed a tribal law. Beneath the crest I read the old Norman motto "Dieu et mon Droit"—God and my right—and, I wondered, did it refer

to the black man's God that commands all to obey the tribal law, or the Christian one who says "Thou shalt not kill".

After I had explained things a little and had stepped from the box, the Judge sentenced the prisoners to five years' hard labour, with a warning that the "Sunday business" on the Daly River must cease. They must in future be content with their own tribal customs.

I smiled as he said this, and wondered—did this mean that the white man's religion was also to be blocked to make way for these tribal customs? But the warning is futile. Trade must ever go on, and with this contact new ideas crop up—it is inevitable.

And as I returned to the office and thought it all over—the fairly light sentence, the "Sunday business", and the secrecy over the whole affair—I wondered just who was right and who was in the wrong.

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## CHAPTER VIII

### OVER THE HARBOUR

THE DISRUPTION OF a tribe brings about migration, and the routes the migrating tribes travel along are called Drift lanes.

Drift can come in by many methods, such as "footwalk", "motor", ship or canoe.

The carrying of natives by ship and motor can be controlled by an ordinance that lays down that permits must be granted for anyone to remove natives from one district to another, but in spite of these laws drift did occur to swell the Karamalal tribe. So the Branch decided to establish settlements for the drifters, and at the same time control the drift.

The first settlement decided on was Cox Peninsula, a piece of land on the western side of the Darwin harbour. The other settlement was to be at a place called Garden Point on Melville Island.

In connection with the first move I was detailed to reconnoitre the various salt-water arms of the harbour to find a suitable spot for a settlement, and at the same time make a survey of the Wargite (sand beach) aborigines who lived upon the shores near Taic Head, West Point and Swager's Bluff. For this purpose the Branch hired a small launch called the *Pirate*—owned by Jack Murray, who afterwards became a Superintendent in the Native Affairs Branch.

Thus was my first sea-patrol, and as our little craft chugged over the jade-coloured waters of the Darwin harbour I felt a joy within me, for I realized that at long last we were moving in the right direction to assist the native people.

We headed the nose of the *Pirate* towards a group of natives on Foster's Beach, and as we neared I could detect a restlessness in them similar to that of a flock of magpie-geese when the hunter creeps upon them, and the numbers on the shore became less and less.

It was apparent that the grape-vine carrying the news of my coming had preceded my arrival; news handed out, as I after-

wards discovered, by the office natives who, though apparently dusting tables or sweeping out the office, would listen in to the news and then retail it out at a suitable price for others to carry on. Everything with the natives was opportunity and trade; very little was given free, everything must travel along the trade channel. Sorrow must be paid for; the bigger the grave-pole the greater the pay-out, the greater the crying the larger must be the present. And with the Karamalal tribe—of which these Wargite were a suburban offshoot—the valuable news regarding protection must be paid for also, and by the time the *Pirates* reached the gravelly shore of the beach the only remaining soul was an old black woman who hobbled away, as fast as the stones and her stick would let her travel, up the path that led through the bamboo clumps to the hill above.

I shouted for her to stop, but my voice only made her travel the faster. A surf was running at the time, so, minus boots and trousers, I leapt for the shore and bounded up the beach towards the nearest humpy, to discover the Wargite had ceased to be of the "beach" and were now watchers from the rock-lands above.

A thousand sand-flies—allies, perhaps, of the Wargite people—pounced upon my wet body and drove their stings into my flesh.

Looking back on that scene I can smile now at my next move, yet it was all I could do, bootless and half naked, I addressed the unseen horde of Wargite in the green jungle before me. I explained that I had a message to give them, I was their friend—and I smiled to myself at what they must have thought of that lot of blah! But in spite of all my talking into the air I received no answer, only the rustle of bamboo leaves and the squeak of their trunks as they rubbed together in the wind.

I climbed the hill and peered everywhere. Suddenly I heard a rustle, and beheld a half-blind woman peering through some bamboos with her back towards me. Carefully I sneaked behind her, and when near I spoke gently in her ear. The result was amazing.

She turned towards me, and when she saw that I was the Public Enemy Number One she gave out a terrible cry, and bounded with the speed of a rock-wallaby down the steep incline, and as she sped I could hear more rustling of leaves and



clattering stones around me as the unseen watchers moved off to a better cover.

Realizing that this method of approach was useless, I returned to the beach and stacked all their rags and personal gear into a large heap. I spotted a large pet pig they kept, and pointing to this and the heap of rags, I delivered my ultimatum. They must come down to the beach and hear my story, otherwise I would burn the rags and kill the pig. This was final.

After this oration I dressed, then boiling the billy we had a cup of tea and awaited results.

My idea of burning the rags and killing the pig was really a bluff, but I knew that aborigines have a great horror of having any of their old clothes burnt—for such a thing would bring on a sickness and cause them to die—and, having a real affection for pets, they cannot suffer them to be killed. I was simply using a law of the tribal elders—magic versus force.

The hours went by, then at long last the first of the beach dwellers—watching me put some bushes under the rags—came down the hill. Paddy Djimunbi his name was, and I knew him well as a good bushman and a number one tribesman. The Wargite had shown good sense in sending down this old friend of mine, and as we shook hands he eagerly explained how he had been away hunting and had just returned. I accepted his explanation, though we had spotted him—through our powerful binoculars—as one of the first to go bush at our approach. "Crise boss, me glad see you," he exclaimed heartily, "you my friend." He pointed into the green jungle behind the beach; "This blackfellow fool, him no savee you him friend"; then questioningly, "What you want?"

I explained the purpose of my visit was to find a new camp for the people of his tribe, and I wanted him to come with us and direct the way to the right spot.

Old Paddy pondered long and deeply over this thing, and then he, too, started a long conversation into the green jungle. Now and then came an answering voice from the hill-top, and shortly afterwards a few people came down, with an excuse about the delay similar to the one Paddy gave. That night we slept on the beach to the chants of the Wargite tribesmen as their didgeredus roared and droned on the lips of the "bamboo puller".

Next day, with many shouts from the crowd—perhaps a farewell of relief at our going—we chugged on our way up the various salt-water arms in search of an Eldorado for the War-gite tribe.

Paddy sat in the bow to show us the "road" over the big mud and sand bars that spread across our path, and as he pointed out the passage Jack would patiently follow his directing hand. Around Sweet's Bluff we went—Yimbir, he called it—when "bang", our craft came to an abrupt halt on a dead coral reef about a mile from the shore.

Paddy's face registered amazement as we struck; he put his foot carefully over the side—we only drew a foot of water—and feeling the bottom with his bare toe, exclaimed, "Crise bottom, boat stuck." We questioned and abused him by turns, but all he could say was that he "No more savee road longa sea, only road longa bush . . . more better." Argument was useless with Paddy, he just did not know, and to our question as to why the hell he came with us he replied blandly, "You been ask me did I savee good blackfellow camp. I savee all right longa bush road, this way nothing." And as he honestly did not know the way by sea we floated off on the rising tide to pick up a new guide.

Our next recruit was a hoary old blackfellow called Harry Delplasse, who claimed he knew everything about the harbour and would show us a good settlement site called Duralangerum, which he explained meant "Home of the black bream fish", and as we chugged along he was full of information about the shore line we passed. Yimbir, he said, meant sandflies, Bemnin (West point) meant the hibiscus plant. I questioned him about the derivation of a name for a long beach called by the aborigines "Pinejulla". He paused for some time over this, then an enlightenment came upon him and he replied, "I think you mean Peninsula."

Harry did know the channel, and as we sped along many were the tales he told of old Darwin and the land around it. The harbour was made, so he informed us, by a mythical hero called Merin, and the islands scattered around were made by the hero's feet as he walked along to make the country. He, Harry, once worked, so he claimed, in the Government Spirit Bond, sweeping up broken bottles and dirt, and as he told us

about that job his eyes would light up and his mouth water at the thought of the billycans full of "Bond-cocktail"—dregs from all the empty whisky, rum, beer and gin bottles that had become broken or emptied by the workers of that place, and all this he and his mates would carry to their camp on Lammeroo beach, and what a spree!

"Crise," remarked old Harry reminiscently, as the *Pirate* sped along the quiet salt-water arms of the harbour, "we been drink, no more little bit, and sing out properly way."

From the spirited way he said it, and the high pitch of his voice at the word "sing", I could visualize that primitive party beneath the red and white cliffs of the beach that shielded them from the "White fellow longa top-side".

"Crise, we been sing out no more little bit," explained Harry, as he referred to the prowess of the white men living in Darwin above the cliff, "but big bosses 'top-side' bentem we easy."

Talking thus, we travelled along the salt-water arms that narrowed with each mile, and when we asked Harry, "How far?" we could only smile at his answer of "Little bit close up", for it was a typical native one that never incriminates them.

We turned up a branch of a big "arm" and the mangrove banks closed in quickly as though they were demons trying to bar our path. About a mile further on we came to the "Home of the black bream". Our arrival was a complete surprise, for a grey cloud of sandflies settled on the *Pirate* like a winter's fog that was aided by smoke from a bush-fire.

For a second Jack and I paused in amazement at the sight. Then we heard a splash, and looking round beheld our black guide smearing mud over his body and yelling out to us to do the same as it was an excellent sandfly preventative. Jack gave the Chapman engine "the works", and as Harry scrambled aboard and smeared everything with mud we fled from a place that, in ancient times, would have been used to help confute Hercules.

Although at the "landing" but a few minutes, a thousand red and itching lumps came over our bodies, and as we writhed and scratched, Harry kept up his flow of talk about we "Cranky no more put on mud stop sandfly", and warned us not to scratch as that would "make him sore fellow".

We just let him talk, and in dignified silence chugged up

another arm till we arrived at a place called the "West-arm landing". Few sandflies were here, and the place must have been a scene of activity in days gone by. Harry informed us—a thing we already knew—that this was the West-arm tin field, and the one-time home of the "Kulpinders" (tin-miners) who "all day chasem up black stone to put em longa bag".

A broken-down steam engine lay in the low bushes not far from the "jetty", and from there we followed a road (?) which led us through a lot of pot-holes to the famed Hang Gong mine. The place is now deserted, yet it produced great wealth for the Chinese who were fortunate to have been the first to see the black woman, Miranda, who gave them the stone and showed them the place where it came from. Poor Miranda: written history is silent about her, but as Harry told us the tale of how she died, forlorn and forgotten, I could only wonder about the many fields that had been discovered by these black hunters. Jupiter of the "Towers", Lucy of the Lucy Mine, Miranda of the West-arm field; how many more, I wonder?

In the midst of my meditation, Harry pointed to a tree and remarked, "Possum." He pointed to the bark. "Look where him make little mark longa him finger . . . good tucker."

Gold and tin were so much dross to Harry, he was hungry now and the possum was good food. The past was just nothing, the present was real, and the future was something to worry about when reached. The present time was dinner time, and we were all hungry, so we boiled the billy and had a feed, and, whilst eating, Harry told us a strange tale of how this mine was nearly discovered by a postal official, who was also a botanist, of Darwin.

It appears that he and some natives were searching for a new species of tree near this spot, and as they were walking up this very hill the dogs of the aborigines started up a big goanna, and the hunt was on. The goanna raced up the hill with the dogs and blacks in hot pursuit, with Bleezer, the botanist, behind. Suddenly the goanna paused near the crest, then turned tail and raced back along its tracks, with the hunters behind hot for the kill.

"We been kil that one goanna just there," from Harry as he pointed to a rise nearby, "and there that white man Bleezer been find that new fellow tree, so we been all happy. But"—

he shook his head at the thought—"supposm that one goanna been run straight little bit more, we must find that mune, because everywhere little black stone longa ground." Then Harry brightened up on an afterthought, "That goanna been proper fat . . . we been have good tuck-out."

Shortly after this we returned to Foster's Beach; our search was a failure, but the lesson I learnt from that trip was that aborigines resist change. They were determined that we would not see the good places of their land, for the beach of Clox's Peninsula was a good contact place for them to gather the spoils of the town. Seeking no more, the Government decided to purchase a property called Delissaville, which was situated on a spring of clear water yet out of reach of the town influence.

## CHAPTER IX

### OFFICIAL STOCKTAKING

WHEN I SEE the mighty department that has arisen from the humble beginnings of that original N.A.B. (Native Affairs Branch) I am more than amazed, and cannot but wonder just when the thing will reach its peak.

When one considers that we were said to be overloaded with a staff of eight in the North, and three in Alice Springs, and compare those figures with the staff of today it gives one food for thought. Much has been done, of course, in the interim; settlements formed and patrols carried out. As I write this, over two thousand aboriginal children are being taught at schools controlled by the Commonwealth Office of Education, and the welfare of the natives is assured.

Apart from Jay Creek, controlled by Patrol Officer T. Strelow, and the two compounds—one at the Alice called the Bungalow, and the Bagot at Darwin—no other Government settlement existed in the Northern Territory—I exclude Garden Point, to the north of Melville Island, which was at that time only used as a control depot for the pearling boats—until Delissaville was opened up.

The original name of Delissaville was "Beluan", a word that means rainbow, and, according to the natives, was said to be the home of "Mewat" (louse dreaming). It had a fairly good spring that flowed into a clear limpid pool, and because of this water it had been the scene of much activity in the early 'eighties, for history records that it was here Delissa came to grow sugar-cane.

Many acres were turned over, and Chinese and the patient buffalo worked the soil. A small sugar mill was erected on the place, for the Government of the South had offered a bonus to the first person to produce this staple product, and at this tempting bait "wild cats" came out of the bag and plantations grew up overnight.

We know now what happened to those ventures. The cane

grew tall, then slowly withered away before the jaws of that great destroyer, the Northern Territory termite (white ant). The place of the "Mewat" became the home of the white ant too. The iron plough was left to rust in the ground, and the buffalo went elsewhere to scatter his buffalo-flies over the land, and together the buffalo-fly, and his mate the cattle-tick, travelled into the south lands, spreading ruin in their wake; and causing despair to the farmers in the Queensland coastal areas.

But the running waters of Beluan still attracted people. Holtz—"Man with the lamp" of Ernestine Hill's book—attempted to grow sisal hemp, but in despair gave up the ghost. Then others came, McCaddie and Grigor, and at last the Government decided to buy it from its final owner—Ailwright—as an aboriginal reserve for the drifting native people.

Along with the purchase of the property was a sixteen-foot launch driven by a two-horse-power engine, a perfect little job that gave no trouble during its hectic life, and on taking over the place (Delissaville) an inventory of the stock had to be made, and one of the clerks and I went over for this purpose. Norman did the book-work and I drove the "Mewat"—my name for the launch.

So once more I crossed the harbour, and passing Talc Head, with its beautiful white cliffs and dark crown of bamboos, I smiled as I thought of my first official contact with the natives of that part.

We had a native guide with us—I often wonder what would happen to many of us if we had no native guides to show us the road in the beginning—and as we sailed along he pointed out various points of interest. Talc Head, which he called "Mudjaleba", he said was named after a deceased elder of that part whose spirit dwelt in a cave nearby. He further informed us that the old Mudjaleba had a store in the cave from which he sold goods to the other spirits around. I could see in his story an adaptation of a culture hero who once danced an increase ritual at that spot, hence the modern idea of the store and the selling of goods. He pointed out the place of the cave, and spoke in his language to a small lad beside him, and I could tell by the twinkle in the old man's eyes, and the wide-eyed serious look on the lad's face, that this was a part of the tribal learning.

Then we came to Wood's Inlet, and as it was low tide the

muddy banks of the salt-water arm were alive with wading birds seeking their food, and at one of the little salt-water creeks that joined the main channel we saw a crocodile slide off the mud bank into the main waters. Above us were the mangroves, and a brazen sun that gave a humid atmosphere to the scene. Mirages danced over the sandbanks and, covered with sweat and flies, we finally reached the Delissaville landing.

What a place to behold. Slimy mud banks around us, dark green mangroves above, and beside us was a wall of crumbly rock covered with oysters and little red fiddler-crabs that peered at us from their shelters as they waved their long single claw that gives them their name.

"Landing," remarked our guide as he pointed to the wall of rock, "little bit rubbish now, one time good fellow."

He had no need to explain it to us. I nosed the *Mawat* under the rock wall, and soon the guide was on top of it looking down and awaiting the official landing of the "properly white fellow man"—their term for a Government official dressed in white starched clothes, as was Norman.

I attempted to make the boat fast, but fell overboard in the attempt, and I could only laugh as I pulled myself out of the sticky ooze. I laughed because I could see the look of utter disgust on Norman's face, and that somehow compensated me for my discomfort. Besides, I was already in the mud—his turn was yet to come.

A few large rocks lay on the top of the mud and Norman—in the launch—made his first mistake by stepping on to one of these. For a moment he waved, as a white lily in the wind, then feebly clawing the air he over-balanced and, with a wail of despair, toppled over into the blue ooze. Gone were the white well-pressed clothes and the neat shoes. He attempted to pull out one of his feet, and in doing so left his footwear behind. Trying to retrieve it, he over-balanced again, and in trying to save himself went up to his armpits, and his transformation was complete. Desperately and angrily he struggled to the rocky wall of the "landing", waving his hands as he did so, to dislodge the sticky mud. He lifted his hands in a mute appeal to the black men above, and they, with a mighty heave, hauled, or I should say keelhauled, him over the oyster-covered rocks of that famous landing-place.



Norman's dignity had been assaulted, desperate cries of pain and rage escaped him. He was about to speak when a grey cloud of sandflies settled upon him, and after that all I could hear were slaps and curses as he sped, or hobbled as fast as his bare foot would let him go, down the spiky mangrove path to the open sunlight.

We walked over a mile to the house beside the spring, and after the stocktaking of the house, tank, piping and engine, together with a T-model Ford of ripe vintage and a plough that must have been drawn by the first buffalo in the country, we returned to the landing.

The tide was high when we returned, and the scene—cooled by a wind from the west—was beautiful. Above us was a cloudy sky that was reflected in the still waters of the broad channel. Chugging along, I noticed that Norman was still a little peeved over his loss of dignity—a serious thing with many of these office dwellers—and he could hardly raise a smile when I asked had he included the "natural landing" in the official list of the Delssaville items.

After the official taking-over, the settlement of Delssaville began, and with it a real test of strength between the aboriginal shore dwellers—aided by their black and white holiday-makers—and the Government determined to control the drift.

The first to be removed were the old people, who complained bitterly to all around that they did not want to leave this, their "proper country". I write the words "proper country" with sincerity, for it seems to be the catch-cry of many misguided white people who complain when aborigines are being removed from one spot to another for their own welfare.

These black people we were removing now originally came from the shores around Anson Bay, nearly one hundred miles to the westward, and although our move was to take them towards their own country they resisted us bitterly. Aborigines, and perhaps many whites too, are like that, they resist change, as the old and young aborigines of the beaches resisted us now; yet two years later—when they had to be removed inland owing to the war—they just as stubbornly resisted our removing them from Delssaville, complaining that that place was their "proper country" and elsewhere was "just rubbish".

And hearing them complain, I thought of old Birbur—he

who liked to make the white man of religion happy—old Burbir, who claimed that Darwin was his “proper country” till he became sick and was put into hospital. Then came a change over the old man, as he pleaded with his white friends to “No more leave me here, I like die longa my country”.

Knowing they could not cure him, the doctor granted him his dying wish, and a buggy took him out to the Four-mile, and with a black friend to look after him, and an abundance of food, they left him. But an “expert” soon discovered him, and a scathing article appeared in the local Press denouncing the Government for its treatment of this grand old man. Once more the buggy carried the protesting old man back to hospital; but that night the old fellow hobbled away, and when they found him dead and withered hands were clutching the soil of his “proper country”. And right on that spot the natives buried Burbir—an aborigine who made the white man happy, although in the end it was the white men who nearly broke his heart.

Brief then must be the story of the midnight raids in the beach jungles of the harbour, raids that only ceased when most of the aborigines of the Wargite tribe were in the settlement, with the one-time dissenters at ease.

Work began on the buildings and in the gardens, but in those days funds were hard to get and the work went slowly.

My job, in the beginning, was to carry foodstuffs over in the *Mewat*, for at that time we had no transport other than the small launch, and only one truck for the town work of Darwin.

These days, to me, were grand times. I was ever on the move, and on the nights when I was forced by low tides to spend the night at Delissaville it was good to see the twinkling fires of the tribesmen and hear the drone of the didgeredu in the hands of a master puller.

## CHAPTER X

### A SUPER'S LIFE

I WAS A sort of odd man about the place in the N A B. at this time, so they gave me the job of looking after the Delissaville native settlement. I was now an Acting Temporary Superintendent, an imposing title that really boiled down to the job of caretaker and manager of a native camp.

Should anyone have a bad friend, or come upon an aboriginal expert who is loud in his condemnation regarding native welfare, then I suggest that they be recommended to a job as superintendent of an aboriginal settlement.

As one individual lonely unit you pit your inexperience against the greatest race of master minds this country has ever produced. If you have one hundred natives in your care, then one hundred brains are working day and night on the ways and means of putting something over the "Kumadip"—a War-gite name for the whites, which means "skin peeler" in reference to the way the skin peels off after sunburn. And speaking of the names given to us whites by the blacks, I will say they are experts at this art. Let a person have some defect in his make-up, and the name for him will be about this thing.

I soon discovered that I was called "Sugar-mouth", in reference to my evasive answers about things in an effort to sweeten them up; in plain parlance "I was not to be relied upon". My other name was "Wireless", because, having a gift of the gab, they always "listened in" when I returned from town, "to hear the news longa wireless". I can never forget the look of consternation on another Superintendent's face when, years later, he told me my nick-name in the belief that I had never heard it before. So I told him his own. As it referred to a physical defect in a private part of his anatomy, it gave me great enjoyment to see his discomfiture, and I knew that his ego had been pricked considerably over the matter. From then on he was not such a "clever fellow", and 'twas then he first realized that "with aborigines nothing is secret".



A striking study of an Aboriginal schoolgirl (See Chapter IX)



Studies of Aborigines

As a Superintendent my first test of strength was with the elders of the tribe who had become, through contact with the town of Darwin, as shrewd as the proverbial bagful of owls. They tried to get my confidence, explaining at great length what a clever fellow I was and how dull were the other whites beside me. Should I have fallen for this "hat trick" I would have been initiated into a sort of "Council of Elders", and once there I would have been in the "blue".

The "Council of Elders" is really one of their own tribal customs in a new setting. In past days the old men of the tribe would meet in secret to talk over new things, and plan how best they could overcome some impulsive youth who had dared to pit his force against the magic and knowledge of the old men.

Wonderful in the past, it would still be good if the old men would use it in the interests of welfare, but they ever tried to use it as a means of wheedling some important move out of the Superintendent.

Supposing one did fall for the council idea and convene a meeting, then you can be certain the subject brought up would be one the natives wanted information about. Let it be dogs, a favourite subject and one that gives a newcomer an idea of the Superintendent's strength of character in native welfare; a mass of mangy dogs and you can be sure he is weak, few dogs and he has things under control.

At the council meeting Old Jimmy Mona will casually bring up the subject, dogs, for he has a few and he is not too sure what is going to happen to them—"Too many dog, boes, longa camp; more better we shoot some." Then you all get into a huddle and plan the whole thing. You name the day and the hour when it will be done, and discover, too late, that the word has gone before and only the curs of the elder's "bad friends" are destroyed. You accuse the elders of talking, but they are ready with an excuse that generally brings the blame back to yourself.

The natives have a fixed idea that anything that costs money is superior to natural things. An old man who lived beside the clear water of the spring would trudge up the hill over one hundred yards to get his water from a tap, claiming, when I remonstrated with him, that "Beluan water belong to black-fellow, tank water water from white man". The walk up the

hill to get the water was nothing, because the water he got at the top was part of his wages. Once when we gathered a lot of wild native honey from trees that had been knocked over by a cyclone, the natives refused to eat it because it was not "honey proper", and one old man scathingly remarked, when I tried to point out that it was good honey, "Suppose we want black-fellow honey we go bush and get him from tree like old time. Blackfellow wages come from white fellow honey"

While this sort of thing was going on the others were busy with schemes to beat the "white fellow man". The children would be down at the garden, and although I knew that they bit off the watermelons at the stalk and claimed it had been done by bandicoots, and ate large hunks from the ripe paw-paws to blame it on to the birds, wild rats and flying foxes, I could never catch up with them in the never-ending schemes they continually carried out.

With the patience born of years of waiting they carried old keys round their necks, in the hope that some day one of them would fit into one of the store locks, and once, when I lost a key in the salt water and could not open the store door, one of them unexpectedly suggested that, "Old man Toby got em key that open that one lock." We opened the door and I thanked him, but I was careful about the place till I sent over for a new lock that could not be opened by "Toby's key".

I afterwards discovered their combined effort in opening locked places; it was a revelation. To file the pintle of a hasp so that it could be pulled out and the door opened with the lock still intact, was the work of genius, and only discovered when the loose pintle worked out a little from usage.

Not that the natives wished to "louse" much—a bush term for minor pilfering of small quantities of food to feed their kin, and as such considered wages—but a sort of triumph at putting something over the white who "all day think him clever fellow".

These things show me that the aborigine is a very adaptable person. I have seen them, with bare hands, do the seemingly impossible. Once at Groote Eylandt—over thirty years ago—I saw them make shovel-nosed spear heads from a chilled steel tank that my cold chisel would not touch. They worked on the soft rivets used to hold it together—before the art of oxy-welding

was used—and with stone hand hammers and a lot of toil, each rivet was pounded until the sharp steel edge of the rivet hole cut through the softer iron. Once free, the sheets of steel were scored by the abrasive action of sharp-edged sandstones, then the steel was bent along the scoring till it broke free.

It took eight men five days to make the steel spear-heads, and as they put in the finishing touches, the angle iron used to support the riveted tank was cut and sharpened by the women to make their "Jalprints"—a metal copy of the traditional stone axe.

Part of my duties was to supervise the kitchen and the handling of all food, cooked and otherwise. I had a fixed measure of tea and sugar, and I watched this go into the copper full of boiling water. But in the bustling I would often fail to see them stir it, so that those in the know—generally the kin of the cooks—would politely wait till the last and thus reap the syrupy tea at the bottom of the copper, whilst others complained bitterly that "Nothing sugar longa tea".

The same thing went on with the stews, and when I trapped them and reversed the process they simply ladled out the hunks of meat to their friends, leaving the watery soup for those who did not find favour in their eyes.

This is a thing which always puzzled me with aborigines. A man or woman in a trusted position was always hardest on others of their race—sweethearts excluded. Harder than any white person could be. No store ever sold things at a greater profit than a knowing native to an unsuspecting one, and at gambling the shrewd one would ever trap the unwary. It was part of the game.

One of the natives on the settlement was called Jack, and in order to strengthen his position he tagged on to some mission people who came over there. When the missionaries were about Jack was always at the services, and when they went to town he would be deputized to carry on. But Jack's weakness was gambling, and one could always tell when he was winning because there would be no service. If he was losing he would be on time with the church bell, bitterly complaining that "Black-fellow all day lazy gambling, no good".

I soon discovered that in spite of all their affirmations of loyalty the Superintendent was a man apart. To them he was



a protector, and after all what is a protector but one who kept them away from the town with its drink and opium and the things they desired. At the beginning Delissaville was but a jail that kept them away from these things, and the Superintendent was but a head guard who was ever on the watch and as such was to be suspected.

I was alone in a tin house on a laterite ridge, and below me were the lights of their fires, the laughter of their children and the droning of their didgeredus as they beat out the measure of a dance. And watching the fires, I realized that the secret of being a good Superintendent was to have an outlook that saw the things of the future, and without losing his temper to understand each move and join in the game by using his wits against the others.

That is the secret, of course; but who would not get annoyed when, after the day's work was done, one sat back at ease, only to discover that the old sick woman you and the natives had brought over a rough bush road to hold in camp until the boat from Darwin arrived, had gone bush to a probable death under the hands of an old tribal medicine man?

Complacency on one side and worry on the other, and I know of more than one Superintendent who went away a nervous wreck, and as he departed the old blackfellows were amazed that a person could be such a fool as to worry over them, who did not worry at all.

Small wonder that the native peoples call us whites "Mr. Worry".

I once talked this over with an old Melville Island man, and he explained it fully. He told me he was sick of the town with its grog and "native affair", but he could not go bush as he "too much like tobacco". His attitude to white people was that they were all right, only they worry too much. "We call him Mr. Worry because he like worry all day," he explained philosophically, as we sat under a tree, "suppose white man can't worry him not happy. When no rain come, him worry . . . when rain come him worry too much rain . . . when hot him want cold and when cold him want it hot . . . must be he got to worry."

But my big memory of Delissaville was Christmas 1941.

My mate Jack Murray came over to keep me company, and

we "cooked up big" for the dinner. The cooking fires were outside and in the boilers we made stews of beef and vegetables. The pudding was "spotted-dog"—dough-boys with plums and currants—and each of the natives had a large one covered with a sweet sauce.

"Close up bust binji . . . too full . . . proper Christmas," they all exclaimed as they shared in this great day of goodwill.

And that night we gathered to sing. The children with their mouth organs gave us all the old favourites, and everyone had a great time, and as this was going on I thought of Norman and the mud, and considered it was well worth while going through all the bitterness to attain such a night of goodness as this was.

The next boat brought a message that I must return to Darwin, and Jack would stay behind as the Superintendent.

Two months later the bombs fell on Darwin, but Jack stuck to his post to form a native patrol that rescued many airmen who were forced down in the bush to the westward.

So I returned to other jobs, but the experience I gained from the old Wargites gave me a better understanding, and a fuller sympathy for the Superintendents of the native settlements.

To me, theirs is just one hell of a job.

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## CHAPTER XI

### DARWIN MUSTER

THE NATIVE AFFAIRS BRANCH, completely fed up with the continual court cases occasioned by habitual drinking and opium smoking, decided to clean up the town of its incorrigibles and transport them to Garden Point—north of Melville Island—where they would be away from Darwin's temptations, and where, under correct supervision, with regular food and a healthy climate, they could become useful for future welfare work.

Funds were obtained to charter a boat for the purpose, and it was provisioned and anchored off-shore ready for departure. Our plan of operations must be secret, for should the police trackers or our own native staff get word of the move, a speedy grape-vine system would warn the people of our movements.

The method of attack was simple, but it was based on an understanding of the aborigines. Knowing these people were detribalized and therefore outside tribal law, we waited until the early hours of morn, and when all was peaceful—with the low ceiling of the cold night making the smoke of the natives' camp-fires easy to discern by sight and smell—we bribed an old scoundrel of a native to show us where an enemy of his lived, and, eager to do this, he guided us to our first captures.

No stealthy movements were required for the job, we just walked among the sleeping natives and ordered them to roll up their swags. Dazed and stupefied at having visitors at such an early hour of the morning, they sleepily obeyed, and we placed them in a waiting truck and removed them to a stone room at the police station, where they would be well guarded.

What a wailing as we took them into the glare of the light, and when they discovered no other natives were there they bitterly complained and asked why we had picked them up and left others who were at such and such a place undisturbed. Thus we found out where others were, and guides volunteered to go with us to show the way. By this method we swept the camps

clean that night, and great was the haul. At last, as the early dawn suffused the eastern sky, we picked out the "down and outs" from that motley crew.

Natives were here who had not been seen for years; others were like some new species of fish blown on to the beaches during a cyclone. Their names were taken and recorded so that the Director of Native Affairs could commit them to an aboriginal reserve, for without this committal order no native may be removed from one place to another.

After their names were written down each one went into the morning air to await trucks that took them down to Lammeroo Beach—scenes of hectic nights in the past. From there a dinghy took them out to the waiting ship, and ere long we were off down the Darwin harbour and northward to Melville Island.

I escorted them on the *Roselle*, and as her Agasaki one-cylinder diesel engine thudded away I looked over the motley crowd of aborigines gathered upon her decks and thought of the pilgrims of other days *en route* to some promised land. The sun was coming over the mangrove shores of the musty harbour, and one old man, called by the ominous name of "Bludger Fred", looked at that orb as though he read a message on its red face.

I served them a breakfast of bread and beef, with tea made on the ship's galley fire, and as they ate it I explained why they were being removed from Darwin and where we were taking them to. Some understood and nodded, while others were too despondent to reply. Some were old people, others full of youth, yet their life seemed to have been sapped away and all they could do was just look over the side of the ship and stare mutely at the shore.

I knew some of these people well: police tracker Nym, who had served the Government well in the past but who now, a broken wreck, eked out a living among the flesh pots of the town; poor old Mary Wargite, who had reared a large family and toiled hard all her life. As I looked at her she was smiling, and singing a low song—perhaps one of her country.

On the boat sailed, engine thudding and bow rising to the swells that rolled in from the Timor Sea. A few wisps of spray came inboard to cause a restlessness. A solitary laugh broke

out, and as I sipped my tea and watched the *Roselle's* mast roll and sweep across the sky, I noticed their bodies moving up and down with the vibrations of the ship's engine, as though the vessel were making them aware that it, too, was alive and joining them in a dance of welcome to their island home.

Forty-five nautical miles northward of Darwin we travelled to reach the entrance of the Apsley Strait, and as we came into the passage the passengers livened up a little when they saw some Bathurst Island natives on the shore gathering turtle eggs along a casuarina-lined sand beach. A few miles further on we passed by the Roman Catholic Mission, and I venture to record that if they had not landed on that island thirty years ago this thriving tribe would have been in the same state as these derelicts aboard the vessel.

Another thirty-odd miles up this winding rocky strait between Bathurst and Melville Islands is a tree-covered point where, in 1829, the British established a settlement "as a means of trading with the Malays who regularly come down to the shores of Arnhem Land to the eastward, and the establishing of a fort, with soldiers, to claim the right of the Crown over all these lands".

Fort Dundas is today but a mass of stones that mark the outline of a trench. The wells, out of which the people took their water, are cluttered up with earth and leaves. The houses have been eaten down by the white ants ages ago, and the road leading in from the waterfront is overgrown with bushes.

Port Cockburn, on the shores of which Fort Dundas was built, was named by one of the early navigators after an admiral in England, but it is known to the Tewn natives of the islands as "Piarumpie". The first syllable is derived from the Malayan traders' word for "anchor", the last syllable is the Islanders' word for "place". But everybody on the islands knows that locality as "Garden Point", for history records that in the days of Fort Dundas one Barclay took up the land around the spring and waterhole, on a sand beach about a mile away from the settlement, for the purposes of growing wheat.

They must have been tough, or well-disciplined, people who manned Fort Dundas in those early days, and every time I hear

people calling the English "Pommies" I think of those gaunt and weary people—not mentioned in history, yet making it—watching the headlands of Brace Point and Luxmore Head, to the north, for a relief ship which arrived too late for comfort.

Inside the Fort the hungry people, and outside the ever-watchful Tewi with his muragunga throwing stick and spear, and to the north nothing on the empty sea but the tidal rips of the racing waters ebbing and flowing with ever-increasing monotony.

But that was, as the Tewis say, in the days of "palanari"—ancient. It was remembered, during the time of our "pilgrim" ship, as the scene of hectic days and nights, for this Garden Point was the watering-place for the pearling luggers that sailed out of Darwin, and other ports, to collect the mother-of-pearl shell that lived on the cora. beds of the Timor and Arafura Seas.

What great days were those when the luggers anchored at the "Waterholie"—the Tewi natives' name for the reedy lagoon nearby. What a splashing and glittering of paddles as the canoes skipped over the calm waters to the anchored ships. How the "muragrabras" -firm-breasted ones—laughed with deaht as they scrambled aboard. Self-made native kings reclined at ease under the shady trees, a look of contentment on each painted face as his non-producing women "cooked up big".

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Each pearling lugger had a number painted on its bow, as is required by law, and each native girl knew the number of her boat; it was copyright, none dare intrude. During the neap tides, when the seas were clear and the luggers were out on the bank after shell, all was quiet on the shores of "Waterholie", but let the spring tides begin and the swirl of the tide cause the waters to become so muddy that the divers could not see, then one could detect a restlessness and an air of expectancy among the natives on the shore. Then out of the night would come the "bump-bump-bump" of the lugger's diesel engine. The silence on shore would grow into a murmur and someone would call out the number of the lugger by the beat of its engine. Instantly the "girls" of that number would be tidying themselves up to meet their sailor lovers.

Tribal taboos were forgotten then, and should one of the "trade" have been under a "pukamani"—death taboo that forbade a person to wash their red-ochred body or handle food for a prescribed time—then dispensation was instantly given by the elders, and off came the ochres, to be replaced once more when the luggers departed to the pearling beds during the "neaps".<sup>1</sup>

The Mission Fathers from the adjacent Bathurst Island lifted up their voices, but the cry was lost amid the murmurings of "trade". Now and then the patrol boat visited the spot, but far easier to catch a watchful native-companion with a brass band—for the little vessel's aeroplane engines could be detected for miles, so that when it arrived at the anchorage all that could be seen were the luggers resting at anchor, the crew with bland smiles of welcome, and few natives in sight.

None of the young ones were in sight, but they were in the mangroves watching and waiting. Having buried all their stores under the sand of the beach and hidden their canoes by filling them with stones until they sank beneath the muddy waters, they now waited for the white "Protectors" to finish their talking to the old elders on the beach, and when the "cranky Government man" departed they would return, with cries of victory, to continue the feasting.

Newspapers, local and southern, took up the cry. The clash was "Funds versus Public Opinion", and the latter, winning the battle, produced the "funds" from the Government and a "Control Officer" was stationed at Garden Point "to watch the pearling fleet and feed the native people".

In 1937 the first Control Officer landed, and as about four hundred of the "non-traders" "ate up big", the luggers anchored elsewhere about the islands, and what joking then among everyone, for they knew they were now doubly safe with the Officer tied down to his post; and thus did the rape of the Islanders continue.

<sup>1</sup> By such methods does a custom become altered. In 1954, at Snake Bay on this Island, I saw this temporary taboo breaking, when a "pukamani" man became free of the taboo because his work at the settlement interfered with the custom. In ancient days such a thing would be impossible, because these tribespeople kept to their tradition, but contact demands, and, ever adaptable, the "Tewi" people reverted to the "Waterhole" custom to do the trick.

But the relics of the Karamalal tribe aboard the pilgrim ship *Roselle* heeded not the scene, nor did they give one hoot about the past. To them, this lovely beach before them was but a prison.

The good ship anchored at last, and as the pilgrims disembarked I surveyed the scene. When they embarked in Darwin it was all hustle and bustle, so that I had not seen their luggage, and now as they lifted it over the side to the native canoes I saw it for the first time, and what a showing!

Swags made up of pieces of striped window blind that had been cast away on to the rubbish heap, bags and old bits of calico. Some of the younger women had suitcases and handbags, others carried pet kangaroos and pups to share with them the doubtful pleasures of their new home.

Then we lined them up on the beach for a roll call, and the number was eighty-nine. Control Officer Gribble was there, and his wife and daughter Pat, to welcome them, and he gave them a pep talk about the past and told them about the work they had to do. Now, as I write this years later, I think of the work these people did do.

Garden Point was handed over to the Sacred Heart Mission as a home for half-caste children, and the native settlement was shifted over to Snake Bay, where it is now. John Gribble went with them and they all performed useful work during the war years. But I can still see that scene on the beach of Waterholie. The black people with their swags and pets, the Islanders looking on, and the final waving to us as the *Roselle* up-anchored to head down the Apsley Strait to the Bathurst Island Mission, where I left the ship to go on another patrol.



## CHAPTER XII

### CANOE PATROL

AT BATHURST ISLAND I was welcomed by my old friend Father McGrath. He invited me to stay with him until the canoes for my next patrol arrived, and naturally I accepted the opportunity of a rest with these kind people.

This place, called "Woo" by the natives, was founded in 1910 to assist these island people. Their first camp was on a gravelly beach near where the boat-shed now stands, and from there they tackled the mangrove-arm nearby and the jungles beyond, and as the Fathers and Brothers toiled, with dust and sweat, the painted palm-scarred tribesmen came in to gaze at the fools who worked all day in the hot sun yet had time to care for the sick children that were brought in by anxious mothers.

Suspicious at first, and ever warned by the whites who were living on the island at the time that they would steal away their children, they gradually gained confidence when they discovered that these people were not as the traders who came and went, but were something that goes on forever and is ever sure.

So the native children came to the convent, slowly at first, then faster with the years, until today the stream is full and the tribe secure.

Over the last twenty years Father McGrath has been among them. His motto is "Kind but firm", with plenty of understanding of the native's way of life, and I have yet to find a person so crammed in the ways of aboriginal psychology as he.

With him on the Mission were the Sisters and Brothers who had devoted their lives to this work, and it is an excellent job.

I walked over that mission station with its acres of Townsville lucerne, and the stacks of this fodder that pointed the way to a new type of pastoral industry, its lines of coconut palms, mango and cashew-nut trees that provided shade and fruit for the native people. But I also noticed that some of the citrus

and cashew trees had a sickly look, which informed the inquiring one that the white-ants were here on the job.

At the Convent hospital I saw anaemic-looking natives being treated by the Sisters for hookworm, a disease that will recur again and again with these nomadic tribesmen, and a part of the education at the mission is to teach these people better hygiene.

Here life is no sinecure. The missionary of the comedy show, with his boastful arrogance and easy life, fades from view, for here is an endless battle, and life is raw. While "experts" talk these people do things.

I noticed too that the native girls at the Convent were dressed in short skirts, which to me is a sign of deep understanding and an absence of prudery, and far better for them than the long dresses some of the other missions are determined to thrust on to their "girls".

Within two days the canoes arrived, and as I stood on the gravel beach, listening to one Sam telling me the way we were to travel, I could only hope that the labour-hungry ones of the mainland would never try to interrupt this work.

Thinking thus, I waved the missionaries good-bye, and we moved away from the shore.

From my point of vantage I could see the forward canoe-man's paddle flashing in the sun as its blade bit deep into the dull green waters of the Apsley Strait, and as it did so the canoe swept out into the tide with its stern pointing along a route over which—in the past—many an Islander and his family had travelled to the towns and had never returned. And today I was about to follow the same trail in the hope of trying to prevent this tribe-destroying drift.

Our canoes were really trunks of trees that had been felled and scooped out by native craftsmen, who used the introduced steel tools for this purpose. Called "kupimes"—a corruption of Koepanga, the Malays who first introduced this type of craft on to the island—they were well shaped and neatly cut, and far superior to the original "weonga" bark-canoes of the past, which were made from the bark of the mess-mate tree that was bent with fire and then laced with a rope made from the inner bark of the wattle tree. The bending was done over the fire, and the tool used for piercing the hole for the sewing was a

piece of wallaby leg-bone shaped on a piece of sandstone. The sealing of the joints was done with the pounded bark of a special tree and, failing this, a stiff mud would be used.

The "weeingas" were frail and would sink if submerged, and naturally were only used for inshore work, very inferior to the "kupinies", which could stand up to rough seas with a big sail spread to drive them along.

Each of the canoes we had was named, and this I found was the practice on this island. The twenty-foot one I rode in was called *Puraworungga*, after the owner's dead father's sister, who was buried in the area where he had found it drifting on the beach. It had drifted, so I was told, from the Alagator River way, where it had been made by its original mainland owner who had lost it in a big flood. From there it had drifted out to sea and on to the island, where it had been found by its present owner, who had claimed it under a tribal law which decrees that, "They who find anything drifting out of the sea shall own it." I questioned them further on this thing, to find that "should an owner of a canoe lend it to another, and the borrower lose the thing, then the owner is at loss because it was he who lent the canoe, and as such he was responsible".

Next in line of our fleet of three canoes was a seventeen-foot job, named *Tipukalsba* after its owner's dead father, and the other was *Kunjalo*, called that name from a big goose billabong where it was hewn out of a jungle tree by the owner near where his deceased father was buried.

*Puraworungga* was equipped with four paddles, a single mast carrying a mainsail and jib that had a sail-spread of one hundred and twenty feet. A small platform was made of sticks and bark in the centre, and this was for the stores and for myself to rest upon. They were my stores, but they called them "their stores", and I was but the one who handed them out when required.

Our first stop was at a place called "Burnajarni" (forbidden ground), referring to a custom belonging to Joe Cooper's Uwadja buffalo-shooting natives who buried their dead in trees in this area—and at that place some of the natives disembarked to go "footwalk" along a bush road that led along our route. Thus lightened, the canoes were paddled once more along the mangrove shore.

The wind was dead ahead, with a fair sea running outside, so Sam headed for a small detour called "Pipilebunga" (sea-road) that ran parallel to the beach for miles, and thus we travelled in calm water. As they paddled I watched them peering into the water for something to kill for food.

Nomadic hunters these, they are masters of the hunt, whether on sea or land. To them all is food; they know, by knowledge handed on from their fathers and mothers, when and where to hunt the various game and fruits of the bush and sea. Migratory sea-birds tell them when the fish will run, and the yellowing of leaves gives them the signal for the digging of their "murunggas" (wild potatoes).

Now and then one of the paddlers would casually take up a spear, and as he signalled the others to paddle slowly he would thrust it into a fish in the water and toss the wriggling thing into the bottom of the canoe. Whatever they were doing, the craft kept moving ahead through the water, and as it did I just lazed back to watch the mangrove trees go gliding past in an endless fantastic picture of emerald and yellowish-green.

The tide was fairly low at the time, and from my canoe the mangrove trunks looked like the forest home of some elfin king. In imagination I could see pale shapes where the sunlight filtered through the trees. The harsh cries of the "jakneas" (mangrove-fowls) were not unlike the cries of tortured people, whilst the clanging and clacking sounds of shell-fish only added to the din.

Sam somehow sensed my thoughts, and informed me that these places were peopled by a clan called the "Ningowi". Ghost-people of the past were conquered by the present tribe, who came into this land from "sun-down way".

As Sam told me the story, a clanking sound came from within the depths. I read it as the call of a bird, but Sam smiled at my ignorance and informed me, with a very superior air, that the sounds were made by male "Ningowi's rock-like 'woramas'" as he crept through the mangrove roots.

Allied to the Ningowi are the "Pamanua" bush elfs, who "never grow up and who never grow old". They live in hollow trees and emerge from them by just walking out. "Too clever," remarked Sam as he pointed to a cracked bloodwood tree on the bank above us; "no door, but him just come out . . . him

got house inside." He further informed me that these people are "too strong for best muscle-man", and that should a person have a wrestle with one of these people he will come away from the fight with the gift of foretelling things belonging to the future.

Shortly after Sam's tale of the "Little folk", we pulled up for the midday meal on a soft beach where the detour came out at the sea. Boiling the billy, we had a feed of fish, cooked on the coals of the fire, and as we ate them, together with turtle eggs and damper, Sam pointed out to me the dancing mirages on the sand-bars and banks over in the distance, and explained that these things were "Pitapatowes" (dream spirit-children) playing about this great increase centre, waiting for their fathers to dream them into their mothers' wombs so that they should be born.

We waited some time at the "Camp of the spirit children", and when the tide had risen enough to allow us to get over the sand-bar, the sun was just beginning to sink into the waves towards the west, and the country of the "Tikalaru" out of which their tribe originally came.

The wind had dropped by this time, and a smoke-like fog (como) settled over us from the inland valleys. Streaks of white light shot away from our path as the startled creatures of the sea streaked away from our gliding canoes, while Sam and his mates whistled from time to time in the belief that this would bring up a good following breeze. When this failed they called loudly to the "shades" of deceased elders, who, they said, would sometimes send them good things as they roamed the beaches at night.

"Emunka," Sam shouted imploringly, as he rested on his paddle. "Old dead one send us good wind."

We waited to find out the outcome of Sam's appeal, but as nothing happened he became critical as a doubt entered his mind, and he muttered, "This spirit business just rubbish . . . I been hunt plenty of times in the bush . . . see nothing."

So we travelled on through the night, whistling, paddling and cursing the spirits, until in despair we went ashore to camp at a place called "Kupatara". The next day we were off early to reach Bunali (Point Ellay), the meeting-place of the clans who were gathered at this spot to attend the last rites of one of their tribe.



A Melville Island hunter with his wife (*See Chapter XII*)



Canoe sailing past Bathurst Island Catholic mission (See Chapter XII)



Black tracker of the  
Northern Territory  
police  
(See Chapter XXV)

Bunali—its correct name is "Ambriceamilli", meaning "Big log lying on the beach" is the central meeting-place of a Horde group called the "Mundicpu", a name given to it after the black clays of that area which are full of cretaceous fossils.

The sand-beaches of this area are hard and firm, with a background of black wattle and casuarina trees and the yellow flowering hibiscus that is useful for rope-making. Behind the beach one can see the dark green heads of the giant Strangler-fig. Strange trees are these Banyans, many of which grow around Bunali, many cover an area of over twelve hundred square yards, and their twisting limbs, which kill everything within reach, give an added morbidity to the jungle scene.

A large number of aborigines were camped at this place during my visit, so I wanted to see this strange death ritual of these Tewi people.



## CHAPTER XIII

### PUKAMANI

THE TEWI ABORIGINAL word "Pukamani" means taboo or sacred, and the one held at Bunali during my visit was for one Peter, the deceased brother of one Ramatinga—the man I wished to contact on this patrol. He, Ramatinga, during a tribal brawl, had used a piece of iron on his father-in-law, George, and this George, when taken to hospital at Darwin with a broken arm, had reported the assault to the police. A charge was laid against Ramatinga—his white man's name was Duncan—and here was I informing him that he had better go to Darwin before the police came over and took him away.

Duncan listened intently, then replied, "George been make trouble first." I explained that although the fight was "black-fellow business" he was in the wrong when he used white man's weapons to fight. "Can't use knife," I informed all that were standing around; and as I mentioned the weapon they all answered, "Knife." So I called each forbidden weapon in turn—"Axe", "Tommyhawk", "Iron-bar". At this stage I paused to think up more lethal weapons, when a native called Kapidju cut in with "Hammer", so a hammer went into the list.

Duncan was a real "head" who sold his wives freely to all comers, and was said to be possessed of a love magic with which he dazzled the eyes of his girl victims and so made them "mad for love". This turned out to be a small piece of pearl-shell which dangled from his neck.

As I spoke to him on Bunali Beach he seemed unconcerned about the charge. He had witnesses, he said, who had seen George strike him first with the iron bar. After wresting the thing away from him he had struck back. "No matter George talk wrong way," sadly from Ramatinga, "I go make answer longa Court."

Not far away a wise old elder muttered to another, "Black-fellow in fight are like drunken white man, they do bad things then get sorry after when too late."

I smiled at the remark, and moved off to a camp to await the death ritual, when Ramatunga would be "clear" to go to Darwin to answer his charge.

My canoe pals took me to a shady wattle tree where my movements could be observed by all. The bush natives—those who were here when we arrived—would talk loudly as they passed by my camp, and should I look up and say "Good day", the nips would be in for a bit of tobacco. Were I to hand out the apparently dead bush would become alive with smiling people, but were I to refuse their request none would be offended, because white people are said to be "different kind".

Should I make a billy of tea and give some to a man, that is a natural thing to do, but let me hand some out to a good-looking girl and instantly my name will be linked with hers as a husband-to-be.

I repeatedly told the natives that I had very little food, but the attack went on, for hope dies slowly with a people who think only of their desires and not of the future. So I just sat tight to await the day of the big dance.

I learned from Sam that the deceased native had been "struck by lightning" when he was at a game of cards on the mainland, with emphasis on the word "struck". My further questioning brought out the following:

It appears the card players were sitting a little distance from a tree that had been struck, and the shock had passed through the players. To my reply, "That nothing", he countered knowingly, "White people don't understand." Then with plenty of detail he explained how the dead one was "proper clever" at cards. He had "devil blood" (a substance that makes the owner lucky), and with this talisman he had won a lot of money from an Island mate of his called Bismark. "Then Bismark get wild," remarked Sam, "and him been get mainland blackfellow to sing the lightning to strike him"—and he had died some time later from the magic.

From the natives' and Sam's point of view it was a clear case of cause and effect. The dead man had dabbled in necromancy, and had been beaten at his own game.

A real head man, who was the boss of the dead man's death ritual, was expected from Darwin by canoe, and day after day the natives around my camp watched the sea, discussing the

sea and the tides, and ever holding up their hands to denote the slant of the sail which would carry the "Big man" across.

A big casuarina tree on the beach was climbed repeatedly by a look-out man who watched seawards. Now and then he would point and jabber aloud and have us all up peering in that direction, only to discover it was a bird sitting on a floating tree out at sea. And often he would call out in jest, so as to see his pals get mad at having their rest disturbed.

This beach tree, from the smoothness of its bark, had been used often as a watch-tower. I asked a native called Cock-eye Bob why this was, and he explained that they used the tree to see if a boat was coming, and when one was sighted they yelled to a mate on the sandhill behind to send up a smoke to enace it in.

"Properly good time we have been," reminiscently from Cock-eye as he recalls a big party when he was made the barman. "I been drink, close up bust binju . . . too much beer." He ended with a sigh over those past days.

Cock-eye was proud of the fact that he had known me a long time ago, and once, during a debate over some tribal marriage business, he jumped to my defence by telling everyone, "This one Bill not rubbish like before, him properly business man now," and as he had said it he looked proudly towards me as though he had given me a good "build-up".

After three days of waiting, Ramatinga, who was the dead man's brother, decided they would wait no longer. So they got ready for the dance.

I must, for the sake of clarity, describe what went on before I arrived at Bunah. I had seen other Pukamanis in the past, and they were all alike.

Death rituals with all aborigines are concerned more with tribal organization than with the deceased person. The clans gather for three reasons: abundance of food at a given spot during certain times of the year, as when yams are ready for digging or the flying-foxes are at known rookeries ready for the easy killing; drying waters where the people gather in to the permanent springs; and, lastly, as often happens on the coastal areas, when all shall gather to lay the shade of a deceased one.

With the Tewi the dead are laid in a grave about four

feet deep, and there they rest them on a bed of bushes, saying that after the next rain-time they will return to put their shades at rest, and all the area for miles around that place is taboo to the hunters.

The head-men, and the time of the burial, are governed by tribal procedure. The nearest in kin are the "Pukamanis" and those of other blood are the "workers"

The duties of the workers are to cut the gravepoles (Tudines), to carve and paint them, also to clear around the grave and get everything in order for the final day of the ritual. The Pukamanis must keep away from the grave, they must feed the workers, and when the final day arrives they must have enough payment in hand to fix up the workers for cutting and painting the Tudines.

And while the workers are getting things ready, the clans keep coming in to the assembly-place, which in my instance was Bunali.

With the arrival of a clan, generally a family group, the head-man of the Pukamani stands in an open place, and with whoops and dancing the new arrivals march towards him, throwing spears ahead of them to ward off the evil spirits that have followed them. As they draw near the head-man lights a fire of bushes, and at that signal the new arrivals race towards and over it, then race round and round it with ever-increasing speed and narrowing circles until they finally smother it under their stamping feet. The idea being, of course, to throw out any evil that had escaped their throwing spears.

When "clear", the newcomers stand and watch the onlookers greet them in a like manner, and after this all retire to their camps to await the final day.

It was at this part of the Pukamani that Ramatinga decided to put on the show, and that night I watched them light their "Linear" fire under a low stout love-apple tree, and as the others sang around I saw the workers and some of the others cling and splutter in its branches, as they strove to throw from their bodies the malignant poison said to be on those who worked near the grave, or who have not been initiated in one of the tribal rituals.

After this "clearing up" ceremony they all lined up and

marched in solemn file into the "ring place" within the camp area. The head-man cried out a few words to the deceased in the distance, and with an answering cry from the others the dance was on.

What a scene it was! The firelight flashed on the overhanging tree-tops, lighting up with different shades of light the circle of native men, who beat their buttocks to keep the time of the song-man; and all the while the stamp and swing of the dancers, arms outstretched. They danced till the dust rose in the air and the figures became obscured in the haze; and yet they continued to sing and dance as, with their arms in motion, they imitated the various Pukwes (totems), finishing each dance by calling out the place-names connected with the life of the deceased.

And through it all the women came dancing in from the outside like threads from a giant loom weaving a tribal pattern. Endless were the songs and dances.

The night went by and the dust rose into the air until even the hardest of whites began to think of hookworm germs floating in an atmosphere well filled with particles of dog and human faeces.

Yet amid that stamping and din was a distinct tribal pattern. The painted dancers were going through the motions of the dead one's father's "Pukwe", for that man is the one who first dreamed their "dream-spirit" from its dream conception place, and to that one's "Pukwe" does it owe its existence.

The singer gave out the new songs he had composed for this Pukamani—they belong to the dead one. The others listened at first as it was sung, then they too took up the song and gave it full throat.

The following are some of the songs that were sung at the Pukamani of a woman of the "Dunakinni" (flying-fox) totem. The singer was a man called Big Jack. Each line represents a dance; the completed song is the end of his work. I have naturally omitted the Tewa language.

"Look! There are a lot of Flying-foxes  
Hanging in the tree branches.  
Let us cook and dry some of them in the sun.  
Hit them so that they will fall

Into the mud below the trees.  
Hit them where they are thickest  
And break many wings at once.  
Look out for the crocodile  
He awaits in the mangroves to catch you.  
Look how the sea-eagle swoops  
To catch them in its claws.  
Listen to the Flying-foxes call,  
'Someone is hitting us, we will go.'  
Now we have beaten all the leaves  
And the Flying-foxes have gone away."

The song does not appear to be much, but one must realize that every male reaches his "majority" only because he composes his own songs at his last initiation, and then the songs are only used once at a special occasion, as was Big Jack's song. It is then forgotten.

The "Dunakinni" song referred to the dead woman's totem, yet woven through it were the habits of the creatures, their enemies, and the obstacles that beset the hunters who would catch them in their rookeries.

## CHAPTER XIV

### PALANARI

**W**ATCHING THE FEW people dancing their Pukamani at Bunah, I could not but think of their past, the days of 'Palanari' they so often talk about.

Their myths of those ancient times record how "Pukwe"—the sun woman—crawled on hands and knees through a night of nights to make this land, its trees and the totemic places out of which the people came. They record that near "Binata" (resting-place) at the swamp of "Puntemikicanterrema", the sea-eagle "Tungranunki", with his brother "Jering-nni" the red-backed eagle of the sea, speared her as she crawled on her life-giving mission, and as the blood gushed from her body it turned into urine that salted all the seas.

Then "Pukwe" rose into the heavens and, as a final gesture of goodwill, she gave them—from her body—the light and the heat that comes from the sun.

So the people roamed the land in light; but they were without fire until "Mudarti", the smoke-hawk, made fire by twirling two sticks together. And as his fire smouldered on the ground it was discovered by a woman who, holding its heated end, cried aloud, "Wereco." As she called, old "Murepeangabilla"—the parent of the totems—said to her, "Your future name shall be 'Werecobilla' and, transformed to that mistletoe-bird, you shall call each morning as a signal for the sun to be thrown into the sky to begin its daily round. And you and I will also call the people to obey the laws of 'Palanari'."

So the people were happy, and never died, until that day when Purakapali of the bloodwood totem discovered his son "Djininni" dead beneath a jungle tree, and learned—too late—that his mother Bima was ever in the arms of his younger brother Japara.

The legend records how Bima was transformed into "Whya" the curlew, as the old man beat her with a stick in his wrath, and as she fled she called then, as the curlew cries each night in the bush, "BiLngea tungatea" (I am bad).

But Japara was wise, and asked the old man to give him the dead child and "In three days I will return with him alive" The old man denied him this request, and after a bloody battle on the shores of "Murepeanga" (Cape Keith on Melville Island), old Purakapali walked backwards into the sea with his dead son in his arms, proclaiming to all that "As my son died so shall everyone die and never return" And north of that place are the twin hills of "Kundunga" (footprints) that arose as Japara's feet left the earth when he leapt into the heavens proclaiming that he would be the Moon "To die each month and return in three days time to prove that he was right and Purakapali was wrong".

And as I sat among the camp-fires of the Tewis at Bunali and watched them dancing, I heard their songs tell how Wercobilla called to Bunata to bring his "Muntalowe" people to record the first dance of Purakapali. And in their singing they told how his people were transformed into Muntalowe, orange-coloured blooms of the bloodwood tree, to record this event.

Bunata is also called "Pudooki", and the legend tells how he stabbed a woman to death because she danced incorrectly at that original ritual, and to commemorate that event the woman was transformed into the honey-nest, "Imbarra", that dwells at the base of the tree, whilst he is "Pudooki", that large honey-nest high up in the tree-tops.

Everywhere is legend and song, a mere remnant, here, of a great tradition, but they still sing on as they dance.

If I had to give a tribal name to these people I would call them "Tugruwalis", a word that means "singing". All great events of each year are recorded in song. Girls, and married women too, compose, and sing their love-songs to their "boy-friends", and these "hits" are taken up by the children of the tribe and are thus carried on to the lovers. And afterwards, when the lovers have parted, the song becomes the copyright of the jilted man. When the children of this tribe are given a picture-book to look at, they describe each page in their quaint childish songs.

Now, at Bunali, they sing the Palanari songs of Wercobilla who called all to come and dance, and dancing thus they follow the tradition of Purakapali, who discarded reincarnation with



eternal life to accept a death that condemns their wandering shades—or souls, whichever is your belief—to wander ceaselessly for ever as "Mupaditties" those dead people who are white by moonlight, black at night, have breadth without depth and who, at the approach of a live person, disappear beneath the earth to cause the rumbling of the earthquakes. This is caused, so they told me, by the patter of their running feet as they are pursued by "Kulaputi", the black-nose python which lives beneath the ground at certain times of the year.

According to my informant Ramatinga, whose tribal name was given to him by his father, who first conceived him as a "dream" from a Mupaditti jungle locality, the island Mupaditties would dance the following night the same ritual as these natives were dancing now.

Ramatinga also told me at that time that, because of his conception place, he was a friend of all the dead spirits. But Ramatinga died last year, and he himself is a Mupaditti, and thinking it over I just cannot help wondering about that final Pukamani when the last "Pagan" dies and only the Mupaditties will answer Wereobilla's call to end the days of Palanari.

Most of the Tewi are today Catholic Christians who have abandoned the ways of their forebears, and the tribesmen are fighting a losing battle, yet one hundred and eighty years ago their kinsmen stood naked and painted on the beaches of their northern shores to watch the Macassa sailing prahus go into the east towards "Aradjaradja"—the mainland with its smoke and evil spirits.

The Malay seamen called this island "Aimba" (slave) and kept well clear of its inhospitable shores. But the people of this island were kinder than their painted bodies and faces made them appear, for the attempt to colour the body was only a means of deceiving the Mupaditties, who were ever seeking to take with them the ones they loved when on earth.

The history of nearly all the tribes shows that they originally helped the white strangers but found out, too late, that the strangers' presence meant disruption of family and tribal ties. Discovering this they tried to resist, and the fight was on.

One of the Palanari stories is about a man called "Murguaiaki", and we know from this name—"Red arm-pits"—that he must have been a white man. He came from Cape Keith

and roamed westward until he arrived at the end of Bathurst Island, and there at "Tungu"—Point Mitchell—he came to a halt, and lived there for many years. He built a hut of mess-mate tree bark, and wore a hat made from pandanus leaves, and when travelling along the beach he carried the aboriginal bark baskets—"Imorlinnies"—on a stick similar to the carrying pole of the Malays and Chinese.

His diet was turtle eggs and fish, and although he never mixed with the natives and never wanted their women, they showed him the way to gather and prepare the nuts of the "Korka" (cycad palm).

When Muragualaki died, his body was devoured by dingoes, a proof that he was a stranger, for if he had been one of the tribe he would have been buried to pass through the Pukamani ritual.

Then in 1823 the Islanders saw the sailing ships of the British anchor off Bunata and watched—from a safe vantage place—the soldiers and sailors under Captain Bremer build Fort Dundas and place the guns in position at Harris Island, called "Pirrmanoopt" (or Manoopt), a small creek nearby.

The song relating to this event was sung at a Pukamani over one hundred and thirty years later, and the songman's words, "Putunamatrî pantapî damonnia" ("Buffalo carrying logs and stumbling down") refer to the buffalo as a beast of burden carrying the logs during the building of the Fort.

Five times "Pukadrînga", the Island spirit of rain, urinated over the land before the settlement was abandoned. Five lonely years of despair that have been well recorded by Captain Campbell, who was later in charge of the Fort, in his paper to the Royal Geographical Society.

After that attempt the island was left alone to its people, and to the white-ant that ate down the houses built by the soldiers of Britain, the quiet only broken as a sailing ship sailed by or a pearler landed on its shores looking for water.

Now and then a ship was wrecked on the shores of the Island, and gave the "songmen" material for new songs and also provided the people with some iron to replace their "Mongwanga" stone axes.

It has been recorded that a prospector called Phil Saunders rode over the Island looking for minerals in the early 'seventies.

Then Basedow the anthropologist wrote a paper about the Islanders in 1906. Brown the geologist landed at Bunaa about the same time to discover cretaceous fossil, but he headed out to sea quickly when he saw a reception committee of painted savages running along the beaches to welcome him.

But the early history of contact with these Islanders was connected with one Joe Cooper. 'Twas at Menepe, south-east part of Melville Island, that a steamer unloaded Joe Cooper's buffalo shooting horses, in 1894, and the Tuw gathered in amazement as his "Tarawali" (rifle) shooters from the Udwadja (sand-beach) tribe of Coburg Peninsula swam with them ashore on to Melville Island.

But they quickly resented his intrusion, and opposed him with their deadly spears in a fight that ended with the killing of Joe's brother, and he himself was wounded and saved by a Udwadja woman who afterwards became his wife.

Joe retreated with his rifle-men, but returned in 1905, to be welcomed by the Islanders—who could see favours by his presence.

From then on Joe's Tarawali men shot at the large herd of buffaloes—descendants of the few left behind when Fort Dundas was abandoned—and as they brought down the big bulls with their Snider and Martine-Henry rifles, the Islanders dressed the skins, and carried the "green-hides" into camp for them to be cleaned and salted by their women.

And with "Jokuba", as the Islanders called Joe Cooper, came the Udwadja woman "Nountu" with her part-Malayan son "Maralang" (bamboo), and the story of her life is that of many other aboriginal women who have helped their white masters to fame and fortune.

But Jokuba was too big a man to desert Nountu, as did many others, and his greatness is still reflected in the general conversation of the Islanders. They still record tales of his Tarawali natives, and the big feasts of buffalo meat they had in the past. They have pointed out to me the exact tree behind which one of their tribe hid to drive the mangrove spear at Joe as he rode by, and they sing a ritual chant of Jokuba's horse that carried the wounded man to his shooting camp at Jiberabu, where Nountu and his Tarawalis held off the attackers till they escaped in canoes.

The Island's history for the first twenty years was the tale of this remarkable man, and his "shooting camps" of Impanari, Meriepe, Tulo, Jiberabu, Bunah, Yarly and Baru are the scenes of many stories.

But slowly the buffalo herds were shot out, and as the work became harder the relentless Maralang ever drove them on. Soon trouble sprang up between the different tribespeople, and the flames of hatred were fanned when a Tarawah accidentally shot one of the Islanders, and the fight was on.

Joe's last stand was at Baru. His funds were low, and the Sacred Heart Mission on the shores of Bathurst Island was making inroads into the tribesmen. His daughter and Maralang had died, and he recalled his son Reuben from St. Peter's College, Adelaide, but he could not prevent the lad from becoming embittered by the attitude of the whites in Darwin, so Reuben left the Island to become a buffalo shooter on the Adelaide River Plains.

The blow fell at last when another war sprang up between the Islanders and the Tarawah, and in disgust the Government ordered the expulsion of the strangers from the Island.

An aboriginal friend of mine, who was one of the Udwardja group, told me that seventeen canoe-loads of his countrymen paddled away, and watching them depart were Joe and Nountu, who were unable to help them.

To add to Joe's troubles, his sailing ship *Buffalo*, with a cargo of cypress pine aboard, was wrecked at Imulu. That year's Kulama ritual song ran :

"Purakapte ngeamerri  
*Buffalo* owinworro,  
 atcraweapinni wolbra andraquare.  
 Mere Kapatunga mookundri abukamaya  
 jiti mintetoowainjinnu."

"The masts of the dead *Buffalo* are under,  
 The sails and rigging are lying over,  
 The white truk shows.  
 Why is the short-necked Captain crying  
 Amidst the rubbish on the shore?"

As Joe and Nountu heard the song they knew why the Captain cried, for it was the end of his job, and the end of Melville Island days. Then Joe and his native wife left, and after a few years in Darwin Nountu died. She was buried on Mendil beach.

The rain time, as required by custom, came to cleanse the taboos from around the grave, and as the woollybutt blooms showed orange in the green eucalyptus leaves, Joe sent out his message for the tribes to gather. By canoe, boat and horseback the tribesmen came, to pay their last respects to that wonderful woman. Joe was there amidst the mourners, telling the dead one that he would soon follow her. It was he who paid the working men for the Tudines, and years after that Pukamani the natives told tales of the "hand-outs", their stories increasing with the years.

Jokuba did not live long after Nountu, and they buried him in the local cemetery, and I am sure his soul must ever fret there, in an area denied to his wife's kin.

And that to me is a strange thing. Not until 1940 did the white people in Darwin put aside a cemetery for the black people. They were either buried, tribal fashion, by their kin, or just buried in the rubbish tips that lay about the town.

## THE PUKAMANI ENDS

THE MORNING OF the final day broke with a strong smell of roasting flesh, for the hunters had brought in some wallaby from the jungle, and a night hunting-party had caught a large dugong on the ell-gross seabeds outside. Instead of the morbid atmosphere that generally prevails at funerals, everybody was happy, and as some cooked and ate the juicy morsels of flesh others were busy painting each other in readiness for the day's ritual.

The painting of each other continued till after midday, and then, at a signal from the head-man, they, and I with them, moved off towards the grave that was over a mile from the camps.

To the tribespeople this walk was one of duty and thanksgiving, but to me it was just hard work trudging through the heavy beach sand. As I walked I thought of a native song and dance I once witnessed on this island when, with perfect mimicry, they retold the story of a white man who was walking through their bushland. How the onlookers laughed as the white man, with downcast head, observed nothing yet cursed everything as he ploughed along. Flies were about his head, vines tripped his feet, and trying to remove them he kicked savagely into the air; and as he did all these things the hero of the show, a black man, walked with head erect and observed all things around him. In the dance he told, by sign-talk with his fingers and hands, the things he saw—the scratches on a tree that pointed to a 'possum within one of its limbs, tracks on the ground and flowers in the trees that gave the sign of other foods. We often joke about the stupidity of the black-fellow, but his dances and songs tell all that he thinks about us whites.

The method of moving towards the grave was to go a certain distance, then perform a dance of "cleansing" as they faced towards the grave, but whether walking or dancing they con-

tinued to sing their songs that were a part of the Pukamani, while in the midst of the singers were others who kept up a dirge about their grievances or complaints.

One wiry native, called by the ominous white man's name of "Whisky", was telling all and sundry that he had cut and painted two large grave poles and expected—according to custom—many good presents in return. Another, called "Umbaru" because she was the widow of the deceased, sang a monotonous dirge about her sexual life with the late departed one, adding such colour and realism at times that one wonders what would happen if it went into print.

As we neared the grave, with its array of painted grave poles in front, the wailing became louder, and turning off from the beach we all trailed through the jungle as the songs became more and more pregnant with stories about the deceased one whose "shade" waited in the grave before us. Now the painted mass of people danced before the painted poles as one of the men crept on to the grave, with spear ready to cast at a Mupaditi that may be lurking upon it.

He signalled back that all was clear, and as he did so some "workers" pulled the bushes away from the grave and, with that signal, they all rushed upon the grave, and great was the wailing.

Looking upon that scene I could hardly believe that that crying mass of human beings heaped upon the grave were the same people who had been joking a short time before. One howling mourner in his frenzy had made a flying football tackle at one of the tall grave-poles, and as the thing was not too secure both he and the pole crashed to the earth with a wail and a thud.

Some old women measured themselves along the ground with dull "booms", their white-painted faces twisted with grief as they went past me towards the grave mound which was, by this time, a tangled mass of legs, arms and bodies of the mourners.

The sun by now was low in the skies, and the shadows of the tall trees threw a sombre atmosphere over all. Black people gashed their heads with sticks and knives, while others chanted to the beat of their tapping sticks.

One grief-stricken old woman paused in her wailing as she



The "Nugwearipa" ritual in Arnhem land. See Chapter XVIII.



Another scene at the "Nugwearipa" ritual—supposed to drive away any evil spirits that might have followed a visitor





A Territorian of many years' standing teaches the native children a new way of life (See Chapter XXXII)



An A songi or Camel  
man  
(see Chapter XXXV)

saw me put my hand into my pocket, and asked for the usual piece of tobacco, but when I explained by sign-talk that I had none she only shrugged her shoulders and continued her wailing.

Some of the natives straddled the grave and, with mouths close to the earth, called loudly to the dead one that he sleep well below. As I watched them an old native, who was called "Jesus", walked calmly up to the mound—he paused awhile as he fumbled in his hair for a knife, then—"Crack". And as the blood flowed down his head from the gash he gave it, he just as calmly replaced the knife and walked away from the grave.

There was a sudden lull as all the natives assembled around the grave-poles, which had been decorated with the presents the pole-cutters were to receive, and as a Pukamani man held one of the presents in the air the chanters sang as they beat their buttocks and the dance went on.

(Should the "worker" who cut that pole be satisfied, he accepts the gift; and thus the singing and dancing goes on until everyone is satisfied, and as each "worker" and his helpers are paid he must carry his pole and erect it around the grave, for it is now a gift to the dead one.)

At one stage of the "payment ritual" I noticed Ramatinga and Whisky in an argument about the gifts. Ramatinga pointed to me for approval of something he had said. I cannot hear him for the wailings that go on around me, so I nodded back, to discover afterwards that I had unintentionally consented to send some calico and foodstuffs back from Darwin to pay Whisky for the poles.

Thus does the unwary get trapped when dealing with a people who combine sorrow with trade, sympathy with opportunity.

But I have noticed that sorrow and crying, with the aborigines, is always that way. They will cry over a person—colour does not matter—whom they have not seen for a long time, and I have noticed too that they were not so much sorry for that person as for the past memories their presence recalls. This same thing applies when the natives "go sorry" as the sun goes down, for it is generally at that time that they remember the absent ones, and in the calling of the names they will accidentally name a dead person and the wailing starts.

At last the poles were erected and the final wailing round the grave was over, and in that jungle gloom I watched the Pukamani people pour cold water over their bodies as they removed the trappings of the dance. What interested me was how the sacred unwashed ones would take the water in this cool night air. But this is the most important part of the Pukamani, for apart from being made "Clear" so that they can once more handle food to feed themselves, it is also a marriage ceremony, for the brother of the deceased man shall, by pouring water on his dead brother's wives, claim them as his own. And as I heard the swish of the water and the resulting gasp, a hand touched me on the shoulder and a voice exclaimed, "We go now, old man, business finished."

So we plodded back through the beach jungle, past the tall banyan trees that had shed their leaves and looked in the dim light like a prehistoric goddess reaching out with her many arms for new sacrificial victims. These banyans are really the symbols of immortality, for their limbs grow ever outward to throw down fresh roots as they move out into the jungle. And strange it is that they should be growing amidst these people who also believe that the "shade of man" is immortal and can never be destroyed.

With mixed thoughts I returned to the camp, and as I climbed a small sand-dune leading from the beach I came upon a painted old man who stood, with folded arms, peering across the sea. Ramatinga informed me he had refused to go to the final Pukamani because the real head-man from Darwin had not arrived.

I asked his name, and when Ramatinga replied it was "Devil" I nearly laughed aloud, thinking that I had that day witnessed a "Jesus" cutting his head at a pagan ritual, and now saw the "Devil" who refused to be present because it was against tribal custom!

## CHAPTER XVI OVER THE STRAITS

AT LONG LAST we set out on the run for Darwin, with *Purawongga* well loaded in ballast for her heavy spread of sail.

Getting into the little craft I overheard Ramatinga tell Sam, in the bow, to stow me well in the middle as a useful piece of ballast. Thus have I been named in turn Storeman, Rubbish, Businessman, and now I have been relegated to being a useful hunk of ballast to hold the canoe in the water. A piece of cargo that must be delivered to Darwin, and a casual remark they made—"Kulu cargo, kulu pay" ("No cargo, no pay")—as I got in was a reminder to each other that unless they delivered me safely the promised pay-off, for both the hire of the canoes and Whisky's poles, would not be made.

Ramatinga paddled as we guided along in the grip of the tide flowing along this shoreline and, with Sam in the bow, we rounded the reefs of Bilemu—Cape Gambier—the old canoe rising to the swell that comes in from the Clarence Straits which separate this island from the mainland.

Sam told a story, that away back, in the days of Palanari, some aborigines foolishly circumcised a youth at a place on the mainland called Bumadjali—Two Fellow Creek, near Darwin. The phallic stone at the spot records that—at the cutting—a wall of water gushed out from the lad's wound and, roaring eastward, burst over the land that connected Melville Island with the mainland and, washing it away, made these Clarence Straits. As all this area is slowly rising, this legend could possibly refer to an actual happening in the past.

The Clarence Straits carry enormous volumes of water daily into the Van Diemen Gulf. For six hours the waters surge eastward with the rising tide, to return again as the ebb sets in. Rising over twenty feet during the ordinary high tides, the reefs and narrow passages between the islands of "Warabadja"—cockle-shell—"Mumu"—Torres Strait pigeon—and the Ver-

non, are a boiling, seething torrent of oncoming waters as the Timor Sea presses its waters through these narrow sea-lanes. The "rip-tides" are bad enough in a small boat when the sea is calm, but let the wind be against the tide and all is commotion as the swirling, leaping waters press against a wind that whips its crest back into the flood.

Round Bilemu old *Puraworungga* struck the first seas, and the sail lay over with the wind as the canoe tore onwards. Ramatinga—man of magic—was perched on the stern of the canoe with his steering paddle in the water to balance the pull of the sail. "Swoosh"—we struck the first of the "rips"—and as the canoe swayed from side to side in the grip of its whirl, I inwardly cursed myself for a fool for starting on such a journey as this.

To say I was not afraid is to admit I am a liar. Clinging to both sides of the craft under the mistaken idea that my balancing powers would keep the craft upright, I waited my chance, then cast a hasty glance over my shoulder, to be a little reassured as I saw the smaller canoe *Kunjalow* weathering it out on the port bow, and as I looked I saw its owner-captain complacently stand up to inspect some part of the sail. To me it was a feat of no small order to sail one of these small canoes, yet here was "Kapidje" standing erect to see if all the running gear was in order.

A blast of wind struck us and the sea rushed past in a swirl of foam, and amidst it all I heard Ramatinga mutter, "Good wind proper quick."

I was all for returning to the comfort of the sand beach, but both Sam and Ramatinga assured me that even if the canoe did get full of water it could not sink, and all we had to do was bale it out and continue on our way. This assurance, and the fact that Kapidje kept going straight on forced me to abide by their decision, and Ramatinga, whose arms were flexed by the pressure of the steering paddle against them, explained that the "shade" of his dead aunt, after whom this canoe was named, would be our guide and protect us as we made the Straits passage.

After about an hour's run we came to the leeward of one of the islands, and running along them Ramatinga broke the silence by asking me did I want a drink of tea. I started to

grumble, thinking he was pulling my leg, when he pointed towards *Kunjalow*, and I saw a wisp of smoke coming from its "midship". So we sailed over, and Kapidje handed me a pan-nikin of tea that he had made from a billy boiled on an improvised fireplace of stones and tin in the bottom of his small craft.

While drinking it, they told me a story of how two old Melville Island men had floated, in an overturned canoe, up and down these straits with the tide till their bodies were green with fungus; but they were still alive, having lived, so they said, on the black-mangrove rispodes that float in long lines along the sea-lanes.

They must have been tough old black men in those "good old days"—either that, or good storytellers. Having just come over a portion of the straits I could not help thinking of a chant I had just listened to at Bunah, referring to an incident when a Melville Islander went to the mainland in a bark canoe and returned with a girl he had captured.

"Minaweoungarri,  
married ngapurruk,  
kutjwillingminn"  
("My bark canoe  
comes home,  
I am married")

As those bark canoes always sank when full of water, I am pretty sure the seas were calm when the incident occurred.

It took us five hours of heavy weather to cross the straits into the shelter of a place called Muramaju—white clay—and as we sailed into this old locality of the aborigines I noticed grave-poles similar to those at the grave of Bunah, standing erect on the beach above high-water mark. My black friends explained it was the Islanders' way of paying their last respects, and "clearing the shade" of a man who had been lost at sea and whose body was never found.

These poles are erected in the same manner as the ones I have described at Bunah, and the dance is held the same way. The sea is the grave of the dead one, and when the Pukamani

is over the poles are left in place till the heavy seas of the north-west wash them out to sea.

From Muramaju we sailed across Shoal Bay, the Madjalimba of the Malays, and on to Rapid Creek, where we left the canoes for the five miles to the aboriginal settlement of Bagot.

They were all happy when they heard the day was Wednesday, for that is the only day of the week which is gazetted as suitable for the town natives to see the picture show which was, and still is, run by "Tomarris", and Tom always obliges them with a rip-roaring cowboy picture full of charging Indians.

Moving pictures are very serious affairs with the natives, and once, when a cowboy hero of theirs was knocked down by one of the "Crook men", they complained bitterly about letting a man grow so old and never giving him a chance to have a rest. That knock-out was a real blow to their pride, and they could not understand the cruelty of Tomarris in allowing such a thing to occur.

Next day, after our return to Darwin, I took Ramatinga round to the police station, and later the office received a message from the station to say that the case was purely tribal and Ramatinga had no case to "answer".

As for my report, I explained all about the drift lines of the sea; how we could overcome it by not allowing any canoes on the southern shores of the island, and none whatever in Darwin. But as I wrote I thought of Ramatinga steering old *Puraworungga*, of Kapidje looking at his running gear as his canoe sailed, that drink of tea under the islands of the Torres Strait Pigeons, the lonely grave-poles erected to a man who was lost at sea, and I wondered what would happen to that great tradition if my report were put into effect.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE CHANGING DAYS

**T**HE BOMBING OF Darwin in February 1942 was the disintegration of the Karamalai tribe

Prior to this event the Native Affairs Branch had removed most of the aborigines from the town, the majority of those who remained did so under orders from the higher-ups who required these people for their needs, whilst others still clung to the mangroves to be near the opium centres of the town.

The bombs put an end to all this dallying, and those old die-hards who had escaped the net in the town round-up—while watching from the shelter of their hide-outs—came bounding out like scrub-wallabies as the bombs came down.

A strange truce also sprang up betwixt the aborigines and the evil spirits of the area. No more did they fear these monsters as the bombs rained down at night, declaring that the "devils" were as frightened of the bombs as they were.

Those bombs were also great levellers. Rich and poor, black and white, and even division of rank among the officials, all was forgotten in the rush for shelter, and I can still see the wondering face of an old blackfellow as he told me about some of the big bosses who had sheltered in a trench with him—"Proper gentlemen, no more growl . . . proper gentlemen."

That bombing of Darwin was a tragedy, but I will say this: the natives in adversity were as good as the others. They helped many airmen in distress, and over nine hundred of them worked as labourers and on patrols for the Army.

This story is not of Army days with its numerous settlements and swarm of "experts" whose knowledge grew up overnight, the degree of their anthropological learning according to their rank.

My years with aborigines in the Northern Territory have taught me that "Those people who know least about the black-fellow are those who claim to know the most". A strange thing this in a country where a person must learn a trade before he can



call himself a tradesman. The excuse the "know-alls" give is that the old-timers have been too long with the "blacks" and have become fools. Akin to this is that remarkable statement which could only come from an ignoramus—"The longer you're with them the less you know."

Army life, to the aborigines, was a medley of superstition and ritual mixed up with Army regulations and fixed procedure. Yet out of it all came new ideas to the natives. The Army medical authorities, with a mighty expense account behind them, tackled health, and control, difficult to get in peacetime, was quickly obtained.

Tribes came together in large numbers—as many as twenty at Mataranka alone—and gave a new understanding of the other people's beliefs. Arunta natives came to Darwin to gaze in wonderment at the salt water, and the coastal natives came down to the desert to marvel at a people who could call a thirty-gallon-of-water-a-day-spring "permanent".

Traditions between tribes were discussed by the old men of the tribes, and very soon an elder of the famous Karamalal tribe found that his town knowledge was just so much "rubbish".

Many Army camps were established, the first by Colonel Stokes of Mataranka who assisted the Branch greatly, and with them all established and under the control of a former Native Affairs Branch officer who became Captain Fred Morris, the Administrator gave directions that we attend only to the outlying areas.

This was a good move, for it enabled the natives to be maintained by a people who had funds and the staff to look after them, and gave the Native Affairs Branch protectors an opportunity to attend to the welfare of natives in other areas.

With suitable introductions from the Administrator to the Navy, Army and Air Force, I was soon on the job, and my first patrol was to my old stamping-ground of Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria.

It was a clear morning when the Douglas transport left Batchelor aerodrome with myself and a lot of cargo aboard.

Sitting amongst the freight, I looked down on the broad pattern of the land below and tried to piece together the places

I was familiar with, but I have found from experience that it is very difficult to know a land below that one has never traversed.

We flew high over the Katherine River Hills, then out into its headwaters where the high red walls of mountains along the edge of Arnhem run east and west for miles. We flew low along this wall escarpment and here and there I could see smoke fires arising from green glens that spoke of waters and native camps.

From over Mount Catts, with the Bulman Gorge and water-hole shining clear in the morning air, I could see the outline of Mainaru Creek to the south, and I thought of the happy days I had had at the cattle station homestead when I was a guest there of Jack McKie and his friends, and passing over I could see the Wilton River and again the memories crowded in of my friend Jack Mahoney and the big floods of the Roper River, of Jimmy Gibbs and his old-fashioned cattle station at Urapunga built of poles and furnished with green-hide chairs, bunks and mats, and people by the natives of the Mara tribe who had battled with him over the years.

In a misty haze I could discern the winding course of the Roper River up which I had sailed years ago, and I thought of the mission station on its banks that was ever sheltered by the frowning hills of Wulmudja to the northward, and then——

Away ahead I could see the jade-coloured waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and looking down on the sandy beaches of "Numblearra" (Rose River), Andjerice and Mulkeong, I remembered our trepang camps along those shores, and that time when, with the natives of this area, I travelled two hundred miles by "footwalk" and two hundred miles by canoe to post an important letter at the Roper River Police Station.

Flying on over the sea we came to Groote Eylandt, with the small houses of the Church Missionary Society at Yetebe on the Emerald River, and looking down as we flew over them to land, I thought of those days when I was trading along these shores, of my mate Horace Foster and our sailing ship *Iolanthe*, and afterwards the *Onyx* which we salvaged after her crew was killed by those implacable tribesmen from Caledon Bay away to the northward; of my marriage in 1927 to a quarter-caste

girl of the Waramunga desert tribe, in the cypress-pine church at this mission.

A thousand memories crowded upon me as we came in to land on the air-strip beside the mission, and there I was welcomed by Len Harris, the missionary in charge. Picking up my swag, I walked over to his residence, which stood in a scene of desolation.

Looking upon that wreckage I could hardly believe that this was the place of twenty years ago. The gardens had wasted away with pests and lack of care, and the bush-built dwellings had crumbled before the onslaught of the termite that respects neither the houses of God nor man. Gazing thus I knew—from past experience—why these people did not move to another site and rebuild anew out of their experience of past errors.

It is a common failing with many people in charge of such places that they will start a thing and ever afterwards try to prove that they are right. Doggedly they will plod on, and should a new man come to show them where they are wrong they will rarely listen. Their reports to their seniors are full of hope, and only when the structure tumbles about their heads do they depart and give the other person a chance—and thus the blundering goes on.

The aborigines, of course, do not worry; to them it is "White fellow business". An old boss is just somebody they know, and when a new one comes it is a time of wariness till they have had time to study his moods. The native mothers warn the children as he arrives, "Look out now, new man come." And hearing these words of warning the children will keep away from mischief as the "new man" tries to pull things together.

But his road to success is hard and full of passive resistance. He argues and explains, but slowly he gives up—and life returns to the normal pace adopted by the one who has departed; and seeing this, the native mothers tell their children, "Him all right now, him understand." And the kiddies once more go back to the good old days of raiding the gardens, milking the goats and having a free hand till the "good fellow" missionary departs and another comes and the native women again give out their warnings to the children.

Customs die hard with the aborigines, and they have many

excuses to offer in reconciling their ideas with other people's beliefs

One old Christian aborigine was asked by a missionary why he, a professed Christian, still had many wives, and Harry replied, "I am a strong sleeper, and how can I be at fault if I go to sleep with my Christian wife each night and awaken in the morning with other tribal wives beside me?"

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE "ANDALYUGUA"

WATCHING THE NATIVE people in their tin huts beside the mission at Yateba, I could not fail to recall how these same people were naked hunters a bare twenty years ago.

This mission was established in 1921—or about that time—not to assist the aborigines but to become a settlement for the half-caste waifs—boys and girls—who were then at the Roper River mission. The half-caste scheme failed, and at the time of my last visit in 1944 it had been turned into an aboriginal mission.

In the twenty years since I traded on this island much had changed, and whether that change was for good or bad only the future can tell, but, in spite of the dearth of buildings, I could notice an absence of the many diseases that were rampant on the island during our trepanning days.

The name of this tribe is "Andalyougua", a reference to their guttural language, and as their "Amwepas" (totems) came through their fathers—with the law regarding residence as Patrolocal—it was obvious that the hunting area of a family and its totem were of the same locality. Thus a people of the "Inegubra" (jungle-fowl) were always located round "Unguruku" and "Yateba", and the "Ingam" (rainbow serpent) people always lived and hunted in Bojweanic, the southern bay of Bickerton Island.

At the time my mate, Horace Foster, and I worked among these people—a period of over seven years, from 1922 to 1929—they were completely naked except in the case of some youths who used—as a form of decoration—"Mapina" pubic tassels made from the bast of the mapina tree. The women were always in the background when we worked those shores. For the first three years we never saw those women, and I remember my first look at them—at a trepang place called "Upramudja" on adjacent Winchelsea Island.

Knowing I wished to take a photograph of them, the old

men of our trepang camp gathered them into a group in a jungle about three hundred yards away from our camp. Carrying my camera, I came upon them in a clearing, and although they had been warned of my coming, some made a dash for cover at my approach, as a wild beast does when breaking from a herd of cattle. The old men called on them to stop but that only speeded them up, and as they "broke" the old fellows urged me to "Wananga-wanangaqua" (hurry . . . hurry). Hurrying, I came to the camp, and paused before a huddled mass of over sixty uncombed heads peering at me with frightened eyes over their bark "Inaquamppa"

This "Inaquamppa" is a form of screen made from the inner bark of the kadjbutt tree. It is made up of strips of bark about four inches wide by six feet long, and these strips are sewn together with "Irita" (outer bark of the ratan palm), as is the canvas on a ship's sail. When finished it looked a neat job, and when folded over was a useful screen to protect them from kinsfolk taboo to them, and a tidy shelter during the rain time.

As my camera shutter clicked I heard a deep gasp, so I handed out to them some tobacco I had carried along for the purpose, and as I moved away I heard some of them laugh—but whether from relief or at my strange appearance I never found out.

The camp life of these people was typical of a race that is on the watch for intruders. All main paths through the beach jungles in which they lived were the camping sites of the single men, who always kept away from the married people's camps.

The married people's camps were in single isolated units scattered through the dense growth, and looking at the pattern of their deserted camps I could understand how difficult it would be to surprise them.

At night only the single men chanted, and if they wished the married men could join them in their camp, but let some stranger try to steal upon them—as my mate and I once did over a dispute when they had stolen something from us—then these same quiet jungles were alive with bird calls—or often it was their totem cry. They were soft calls, and it was difficult to know from which direction they came, but they were the alert signals of the clan.

In their hunting plan there was a sharp division between the

sexes, the women going in one direction to hunt their food, the men in another, and should a man intrude upon the women's declared hunting area an old woman would warn him of his error by clapping her hands repeatedly, and it was his duty to obey her signal and walk away in the opposite direction.

During our stay on the island I saw quite a few youths speared in the legs—a sort of light fine—and once a man called Kundear was speared through the chest because he disobeyed the old woman's signal and tried to steal a young girl.

As the hunting areas of the sexes were controlled by the old men, so were the time and locality controlled by the winds, flowers and signs from the object in their tribal lands.

The red flowers of the "mearowa" tree (*kurrajong*) would denote yams in the beach jungle "Mumreka" (south-east winds) meant crabs full of rich red eggs in the mangroves of the sheltered areas. The "nindrepa" (*greivillea* blooms) when laden with nectar were the time for rich and sweet-tasting honey; or the dew on the grass, in the winter time, denoted the strong south-east winds would subside a little and thus allow the canoe-men to go out to the north-east isles to catch the hawk-bill turtles as they came riding in on the long rollers of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The hunting of the food was governed by the creatures hunted: the dugong in the quiet of the night when its breathing could be heard as it surfaced, and easily followed up because of the phosphorescent wake it left as it moved along, the sting-ray was best hunted in shallow waters at early dawn, for it would then feed close inshore, to move into the deeper waters as the sun rose higher. And at night time, when the low tides exposed the reefs, how pleasant were the scenes we watched as the native hunters waved their flaming cypress pine torches over the waters and speared at the shoals of fish that came in to feed upon the banks.

The hunters of this tribe gathered food, the major portion of which they ate. And just as the hunting areas were divided, so were the types of food gathered by the different sexes divided also.

The men would hunt the dugong with their "liba-libas" (wooden canoes)—introduced by the trepanging Malays, but made and used by these people for so long that they had com-

pletely forgotten how to make the "Alamugga" bark canoe of olden days—and when they returned with a kill they would cook it on the beach. After eating their portion—demanded by tribal law—the rest would be sent to the women, who would hand over some titbit they had gathered in their area. As all sea foods were the prerogative of the men, so did the women control the "mernunga" (cycad-palm nuts), yams and "migranuts" from the jungles and swamps.

When not hunting during the heat of the day, or when an abundance of food had been gathered, I noticed that certain men were kept busy making articles that were used to trade with other tribes. Wonamalay and his brother always made the delicately barbed spears called "mungerattas", and another old fellow called Mearowa made stout well-twisted three-lay dugong and turtle ropes from the bast of the kurralong tree he was named after. Old Agalyarra of Upramudja and Owie from Windanga (Cape Barrow) were always in demand to shape the delicate turned stems of the wooden canoes. They were expert craftsmen in their trade, and I noticed they were well fed during an "order" by the people who wanted the work done.

An interesting custom regarding canoes when we were there was that a man who wanted a canoe would bring to us a chip from one of the paper-bark, Leichhardt, or milk-wood trees growing in that area. We would take the chip and in return supply him with some tomahawks, an adze and a little food, and he would go out and cut the canoe. After he and his kin had cut, trimmed and burnt it over a fire—a custom said to stretch and preserve it against the torredo worm—he would deliver it to us. We in our turn would brand and hand it back to him. By this custom we owned the trade that canoe caught, and he owned the canoe as long as he did not deceive us. We did not originate this custom; apparently it came from the trepanging Malays.

I saw some ritual, but at that time I was too busy with trade to understand what I saw, and in my ignorance I gave it up when I discovered that the painted sacred boards of their rituals were only of value to the tribe. The first lot were brought in at dead of night by an elder, who told me in his language, which I understood, the meaning of each symbol on the



"board", and carefully I wrote each story down. Wishing to check up some time later, I asked him again, but the stories were never the same.

I gathered more of these things, and although I checked again and again, for five years, I never got the same stories for the same boards. They could tell me it was a turtle or a dugong if one of these creatures were drawn upon the "board", but they were lost when it came to the abstract art. Apparently they would have had a picture in their minds when they were drawing, and this they had put on the "board", but they had never reached that stage when the painted designs could recall to their minds the original story.

During my days on those islands and the mainland I met many great blackfellows, but I also learnt that one must be ever careful when dealing with their customs and their tribal way of life. For instance, to enter a native camp in company with other aborigines without first going through a cleansing ritual, was to cause trouble. Many times have I sat down under a shady tree some hundred yards from the camp to await the ceremony.

The procedure was that two men of the camp would come out to welcome us, then they and two of the native men with me would return to the camp, where they would be met by an elder carrying in his hand a spear. My two native friends, with their two assistants, would then stand in line on the beach with their "mungallas" (throwing-sticks) at the ready. At a signal from the elder they would run sideways and then, with a swishing sound and a flick of their mungallas, return to the original position.

This flicking and swishing ritual was said to drive away any evil spirits that might have followed us during the day, and when satisfied that all was "clear" they would await the thrown spear—tossed by the elder welcoming them in.

This custom is called "Nugwearipa" (throw past), and by it a native could prove he was without evil intent, for if he were touched by the spear it would prove to the camp-people that the "shade" of some dead-one was letting them know he brought trouble.

After this ritual was completed, a woman—generally the mother and guardian of a package of bones that was always in



Letter patterns decorate the "clothes" of a deceased Lewi  
(See Chapter XV)



A Gna'one ritual, on Golbourne Island. (See Chapter XXII.)



With the Warrangan ritual dance come both trade and songs  
(See Chapter XXII.)

the camp—would come down to "cry over them", and at that signal we would be given the sign that all was "clear". Only then could we enter the camp site and be made welcome.

Among these tribes, this keeping of "packages of bones" in nearly all camps arose from a custom where the body of a deceased person is placed on a stage—as is the pattern with all tree burials—and there it becomes "Lualuwa"—a word that can mean "cooked", "decayed" or "ripe"—and when the flesh has fallen off the body the bones are collected by the mother's brother. As he gathers, he cleans and watches them, so that none shall be removed by someone who will use a bone for an evil purpose and cause others to become ill by its magic. These bones are brought into the camp, and amidst singing and ritual he puts each bone into a cylindrical bark coffin, which is sealed at the ends and painted with the dead one's "Rangga"—totemic design first painted on to an initiate at a sacred ritual. After this ceremony the coffin is handed over to the mother or grandmother, who carries it from camp to camp as they go hunting and, at camp, this is the central stage piece for the nightly chants.

Often have I sat in those native camps to watch the dancing youths gather round the bark coffin on its stage. The "Eruga" (didgeredu) was always full-throated and the "Song-man" a master at his craft. And as the "Eruga" droned and the dancers stamped the totemic theme that "Song-man" told in chant of the soul's wandering along its esoteric path into its place of reincarnation; of how it was met by the "willy-wag-tail", who gave it sea foods to eat, but became angry and hooked them back again because the dead shade offered him none. The song story went into each event of the dead one's travel to a resting-place above, where it was met by its departed relatives awaiting there to greet him; and at that meeting they held a ceremony giving them youth, the ceremony ending by the throwing of a small stone, which became a falling star to let those on earth know that the dead-one was ready to be reincarnated.

And as the "Song-man" chanted and the youths danced, I would peer along the lines of fires to see the naked women of the tribe sway as they rubbed their bodies with red ochre as a part of the tribal dance.

To get the real feel of aboriginal camp life one must live in their camps to hear and see the jokes they play on each other; to hear the "Song-man" chant a cautionary myth as the children—with bodies and hands imitating the actions of the bird or animal he is portraying—dance before him; to lie down on the warm sand as the moon filters through the casuarina trees on the beach, and hear the mothers jokingly scold their children as they gather round the camp-fire to cook small pieces of flesh on pointed sticks.

Those Island people taught me a lot about life, and lucky was I to have been among them, for in the north at that time avenging wars were the order of the day. Easy indeed for those people who came in days ahead—when all was peaceful and under the control of missionaries—to go away and talk of past traders as though they were evil beings. I knew many of these brave and fearless men who tried to open this land. Their graves are unknown today, but out of their struggles has developed a black people who have forgotten their bitterness at the loss of the Malayan trepanger's trade and are now pulling their weight in the task of opening this land as a future home for their kin.

The old order has departed, and writing this I do not know whether to be glad or sad. But I do hope those Groote Eylandt black people—descendants of old Yamboku, Pupootarija, Wonamalay and the other grand old men I knew—will be taught that their ancestors were a kindly people who were ever peaceful, kind and helpful to the many traders who sailed and traded along their shores.

## CAVE PAINTINGS

I REMAINED SOME time with Len Harris at the mission, and while there he showed me some of his findings regarding the natives' marriage system, for it was always the endeavour of trained missionaries to keep within the tribal pattern. He also told me that they were about to remove the mission to a better site at a place called "Unguruku", a few miles to the northward of the present place.

During my stay I saw many of my old native friends, but I am afraid that they now looked upon me as "Different kind man", and as a Protector I was somehow "out of it all". Nevertheless it was good to be able to shake hands with those who had helped me so well in the past and now, after comparing them with some of the other natives I have met I can truthfully say they were great people.

But an aeroplane arrived to take me to Oenpelli Mission, where I had some work to do, so I waved them good-bye with a sad heart. Soon the islands were far behind, and ahead were the swamp-plains and the hills that are around Oenpelli. As we taxied down between the pandanus palms and the big water-lily lagoons covered with magpie-geese I could only wonder at the changing scenery of this Northern Territory.

Oenpelli was originally the home of a well-known buffalo-shooter called Paddy Cahill, who afterwards became a Protector of Aborigines in the Gilruth régime. The place passed through many changes during its life. As a Government property it piled up debt, and was called by the local Darwin paper "Owing-plenty". It finally passed over to the Church Missionary Society as an Aboriginal Mission.

Most of the aborigines, when they heard from the missionaries that they were about to become "good Christians" headed for their tribal hunting grounds or to the towns, and the present "converts" are from the once uncontacted tribes who came in from the interior of Arnhem Land.

This Oenpelli is in my opinion one of the "spring-boards" that have continually drained Arnhem Land of its native inhabitants. For some unknown reasons the white superintendents get it into their heads that some habit the native has formed is the work of Satan. The last "cleansing" purge and mass movement was when they cut out the issue of tobacco, and many a good native woman wandered into the contact area as a result.

Of course, the real curse is the easy access to the towns by uncontrolled natives and, deny the fact as we will, this uncontrolled native is not dying but is being slowly destroyed by those people who require cheap labour and gobble them up as they wander from the reserves.

The mission station of Oenpelli stands on a swamp-plain surrounded by sandstone hills that are simply covered with the art of a people who have gone before. The walls of its crevices and caves are a mass of colour depicting the efforts of three types of artists who strove for mastery of their art.

The picture galleries are always at some spiritual centre of the tribe, and at these places the elders of old crouched over their grinding stones to mix—with their fingers and spittle—the coloured ochres for their art, and after first applying a size of crushed orchid stalks, well mixed with water, on to the rock wall about to be painted upon, and using as paint-brush a well-chewed green twig of a tree, they would trace the creatures of their imagination.

As I walked through those galleries, ending at the ledge of the "Thunder-man" that overlooked the plains below, I could not fail to picture those elders who had sat in its cool shade, gazing at the weathered lines on the rock face before them as they conceived a picture and brought it into being.

A nice flat stone wall close by a permanent water-hole became an excellent medium, and if some coloured ochres were about, the pictures would take shape, in the same fashion as one sees them on the big squatters' tanks beside the stock routes. But whatever the origin of the idea, those paintings around Oenpelli were masterpieces of the black man's art. In crannies and on ledges the paintings came into view as one scrambled over the rocks. Overhanging ledges, where the artist must have lain on his back or clung to the roof like a bat, were used as

his "canvas", and on those walls I saw the creatures of this land as a super, super impressionist saw them.

Red crocodiles over six feet long, red, white and yellow bats with hooked wings and deadly-looking teeth, rainbow serpents with long whiskers and very diabolical grins on their faces: and each of these were drawn with fine lines. I checked one of the large paintings in a rough way and discovered that the lines for that one picture measured over a quarter of a mile in length. As with all people who strive for something greater than their art, the artists had superimposed one picture on top of the other in utter confusion.

On the outer tip of an overhanging ledge twenty feet from the ground were more paintings and these, my native guide told me, were the work of artists who used a long pole propped against the floor of the cave. As he told me this I pictured that artist clinging, grunting and straining as he worked at his trade.

Yet what was the driving force that compelled these people to do this thing? Imagine the search for the pole in the bush, the cutting and the carrying of it into place, then the climbing and straining as he painted.

Working for fun? Not if it is our aborigine, who only works hard when there is a tribal religious purpose behind that labour. "Then to what purpose?" one may ask. What urge would make him trade for ochres, or mine his own in distant quarries? What urge would drive him up this hill to paint, even in dark places where nobody could praise his work, these remarkable paintings? What reward did he expect when he painted a picture over another painted by himself a short while before, or completely obliterated a fine drawing of another artist with his own work?

In my opinion only one driving force could compel the black man to do that thing: ritual. He painted these things as a creative art. To him they were the things he most desired.

The idea of man being made by a God and therefore beloved by his gods is as old as man. Therefore this God-man re-created the things he desired, because his legends had told him that he was their master. Kangaroos, bandicoots, fish, reptiles—all are drawn nice and fat because he desires them that way.

Many of the paintings have been drawn as though seen through an X-ray, and beholding them we are amazed at the



line detail of the creature's internal organs. I questioned one of the artists who was working on a bark painting, and he described things to me.

"This," he explained, as he pointed out an object amidst the intestines, "is the fat." Then, with emphasis, "Proper fat this one." "That there," again on the anatomy, "is the heart. This red thing is the liver and the white fine lines are the backbone."

Each part was pointed out and it was correctly in place. Nothing strange about this, because these people had been cutting up and eating these things for years. They were professional anatomists when the drawings of the ancient white doctors would have been laughed at by an Oenpelli aborigine.

It was on those hills round Oenpelli that I saw the match-stick art that is so full of animation. My guide told me it was the work of "Me-mies", the mythical bush elves who are "too clever" to be seen, and who draw these things, in the dark, from a paint made up of human blood and charcoal. Those "Me-mies" were indeed "too clever"—a few strokes on the rocky face and the picture was a group of natives fleeing from another.

I asked the native what he thought about them. He only shrugged his shoulders in reply, but shortly afterwards when we came upon a meaningless thing of coloured ochres and lines his voice vibrated with pride as he explained it in detail. The lines were the falling rain, the red streaks were the lightning thrown by a sky hero, the dots were the rain drops splashing on the ground below, which was another splash of ochre; the wriggly lines were the rivers in flood.

"Good picture?" I questioned him, as he stood expectantly by awaiting my decision. "Proper good," came his reply. "Plenty rain . . . full up tucker."

It was his expression of modernism in its highest form, for it pictured his desires. "Full up tucker," therefore it was a perfect work of art. No wonder he scorned the animated work of the "Me-mies" whose art—from his standpoint—was of no value because everybody could tell at a glance what it meant. It was Art, but not "Ritual-art".

He and I came out from the picture galleries well satisfied with our day's work, and noticing my contented look the old fellow "put the nips in" for many presents as payment for his part in the proceedings. I promised until my "face reguter"

warned him he had reached the point of saturation, so he changed the subject and told me about the interesting myths of this land; and so talking we came to the mission beside the big lagoon.

Each time I visit a mission conflicting thoughts run through my mind, for I see the houses of the white people and compare them with those of the blacks. Yet these things, although visible to the casual visitor are, in my opinion, of little account, for do not these people prefer to live upon the beaches near the sea or under a shady tree beside the lily lagoons?

It is in native welfare that the missionaries do good work, for by education they teach the people many things, appreciation of our white doctors and medicine, care of the aged and sick people; common understanding between the different tribes, and an appreciation of the arts and crafts.

I do not mention religion, because I believe this black man's faith in his own rituals is bound up with his will to live, and this statement of mine has only come about after many talks with Christian natives and the mission people. Maybe time will be the factor that will bring them round to the true Faith—a Faith that will be given to them by the zone in which they are born.

For just as the child grows into the religion of its parents, so will the denomination of the aborigines be decided on by a zone system laid down by the Government and the missionaries.

Bathurst, Melville Islands and the Daly River and south of Alice Springs is the "Catholic Zone"; Eastern Arnhem Land is the Zone of all good Methodists, Groote Eylandt, Roper River and Oenpelli is the Church of England Zone. The Lutheran Zone is west of Alice Springs, with the Baptists to the north of the town.

That night I slept at the mission and heard the magpie-geese fly overhead, and next morning Jack Slade of the "Con-flight" picked me up. As we took off over the screaming masses of water-birds and the cattle feeding on the green para-grass I watched the sun strike the tip of Inyerluk hill and, in fancy, saw the old artists working like ants in its painted galleries.

Then we crossed the East Alligator River, and looking down I could see the wide buffalo plains that seemed to roll out before

us, the Mary Plains with the lotus blooms on bamboo-lined lagoons, the herds of buffalo ever guarded by the white egrets, and over all the water-birds of every colour in their millions. A strange land, and yet it is Australia. We fly on into the Adelaide River hills, towards the Batchelor Air Strip not far from the still-to-be-discovered uranium fields of Rum Jungle.

Behind us was Arnhem Land with its sandstone hills crammed full of cave paintings deep in those craggy gorges that gave rise to the Liverpool, Goyder and Walker rivers; the Arnhem Land Reserve with its missions and its strange past.

And landing on the bitumen strip amidst the tall mesquite trees, I was soon hitch-hiking a ride into Darwin to board the motor-vessel *Kuru* which was going on a patrol of Arnhem Land—a patrol that revived for me those days when I was a trepanger drifting and trading along its fascinating shore line, and sailing through the cool nights my memories were of its strange past full of Macassans and trade, of missionaries and murders.

## EASTWARD THE COURSE

As the motor-vessel up-anchored and headed out into the eye of the sun I looked on to the cliff lines of the Darwin harbour and thought of its past and future; of that day well over a hundred years ago when Stokes of the *Beagle* sailed in to name it after his old friend Charles Darwin, and that day when the cable ship from overseas was paying out its final length of cable as men working on the beach pulled it ashore not far from that place where Goyder landed in '69 to first survey the township.

Darwin Harbour itself looks like a sea-giant's scraggy hand trying to clutch the land, and the Channel Island—once sacred to the culture-hero Merin, because he made it with his stumbling feet as he formed this land—lies low in the distance because of the morning mist.

'Tis low tide, and the Weed Reef showing above the water are a reminder that here, according to native mythology, lives the Old Man of the Sea, who is ever waiting to trap those youths who disobey the tribal lore.

The tide waters race along in the ebb, and ere long we are out to sea. The white houses of the Darwin township recede, then fade from sight as we round East Point. We pass the Casuarina beach ending at Lee Point, where old man Pruett had his vision of a coconut plantation—which flourished only to provide him with a nut diet in his old age. Such was life for those who came to experiment with this land; full of vision and full of hope, they grew their crops in a marketless land and lived on the products they could not sell.

Beyond Lee Point is Gunn Point—the "Muramaju" of canoe patrol—and as we passed into the Vernon Passage the Captain pointed to a sailing canoe ahead. It was crossing our bow, and in the stiff north-east breeze was skimming over the sea like a giant water beetle, and making a great showing with its white sail spread and black bodies against the blue background of the sea.

East of the Vernon Light, and not far from a small islet shown on the charts under the strange title of "Pussy-cat Island", is a low mass of black rocks in the water. These are the "Old Man Rocks" of aboriginal mythology, for legend records that here dwells an "Increase spirit" who controls the turbulent "rips", and in ancient days the hunter who was lucky in the hunt would cast some of his catch into the sea at this place as a form of tribute to the "Old Man".

As we sailed by that place I thought of the "talas", heaps of stones all over the north, and remembered a native telling me that they were the abodes of "Food-spirits". These heaps of stones were always on a watershed, and when the successful hunter passed them he always placed a bush or stone upon them in the belief that the Food Spirit would not pass that spot, and that by remaining in the area it would give the hunter more food in the future.

Past "Old Man Rocks" is the mouth of the Adelaide River, with its herds of buffalo on the swamp plains, and its flocks of wild fowl. It was on this Adelaide River that the Master-at-Arms of the *Beagle* encountered a large bark canoe full of aborigines, and of them he wrote "The canoe I saw was one of great workmanship, and showed the hand of good craftsmen. . . ."

He also recorded that they encountered many vampire-bats—our old flying-foxes—and not liking the look of them turned their long-boat back down the river and away from the pests.

Past the Adelaide River are the red walls of Escape Cliff, where two members of this same *Beagle* were surprised by the natives and, "by putting on a dance so amused their assailants that they held off the attack until a rescue dinghy arrived".

And here at Adam's Bay a settlement was founded a few years before Darwin, and Ernestine Hill, in her grand book *The Territory*, tells the story of how McKinlay arrived here in a horse-hide boat after a memorable journey over land and sea.

These seas are crowded with memories of the great navigators, Tasman, Flinders, Stokes and King, yet their names are not on these charts. Only the names of Van Diemen, Dundas, Melville, Bathurst, Coburg and Croker, admirals, secretaries and governors, who never saw this land, are here.

Now and then we find the names of Katherine, Edith, Beatrice and Maria given to islands and rivers, and looking at them one thinks of the women who gave "Godspeed and good luck" to those explorers and navigators as they said farewell. And often in past years, as I sailed by Maria Island off the Roper River mouth, I thought of Tasman and of his impressions as he first saw it and named it after a girl in his home port of Java. What thoughts were his that day, certainly not the same as those who named some headland, river or island after some patron overseas.

It was nightfall as we entered the Dundas Strait, and on our starboard bow the Djimlingi light of the Uwadja tribesmen flashed into the night from the Cape Don lighthouse on the northerly tip of the Coburg Peninsula, and seeing it I could not help thinking of the old blackfellow who bitterly complained to Alf Brown that the passengers from the wrecked steamer *Australian* had eaten up all the turtle eggs on his beach as they awaited a rescue party. But that was in the days before this light was built in 1916 as a means of avoiding another such disaster.

Coburg Peninsula is today a flora and fauna reserve, but in the past its sheltered bays and harbours were the scenes of much activity, for it was at Trepang Bay that the prahus of the Macassan trepangers assembled ere they returned to their home ports in the Celebes.

In Raffles Bay the British established another settlement after the failure of Port Dundas on Melville Island, and Wilson, who lived there at the time of the settlement, gave a good picture of the place in his book *Voyage round the World*. Raffles Bay in its turn was abandoned for Port Essington, where the ruins of Victoria township can still be seen among the low bush growth.

Captain Stokes of the *Beagle* attended the first theatrical performance in the Northern Territory at that place, and declared it was a "good show". Here also came Ludwig Leichhardt, as he terminated his overland trip across Queensland and the eastern part of the Northern Territory.

The first cattle station in the Northern Territory was taken up in this area by a chap called Campbell, and the place was also the home of another rover called Robinson, who afterwards—according to Searcy's book *Tropic Seas*—became a "Landing

Waiter", to be stationed at Bowen Straits and collect taxes from the Malays as they came down to trade along these shores.

Victoria township was abandoned in 1849, and after much searching, with trial and error, Darwin came into being. Today Victoria is a heap of stones and wrecked buildings in a wilderness of bush. The old lighthouse on Smith Point has fallen into decay, and once as I stood beside it my thoughts were of those chaps who kindled a beacon fire on its platform and watched the sailing ships go past towards the township.

What memories had the men who stoked that beacon? How close must have been the *Old Dart* as they watched the ship go sailing by. As I too stood amidst the wrack I thought of those people who built in vain. But was it all in vain? In one of their journals we can read how they had "lost some buffalo which had strayed away into the bush and could not be found". They had strayed all right, but years afterwards their offspring were found in their thousands on the swamp plains, and since that time their hides have been sought after by the buffalo shooters of that part.

And now we were sailing through the night past that spot. A native's fire twinkled on the beach to remind us that this was still the home of the tribespeople.

That night we anchored in Bowen Straits, the "Odjantambanodjan" of the Trepanging Malays, but known to the aborigines of that part as "Yeregul", and there under the veranda of the old tax collecting depot I stayed awhile with my old mate Alf Brown, he who knew this land so well and was well known to the aborigines as the "Commandant".

Lying on my bunk one night, my thoughts went back to a book old Alf had plucked from his bookshelf and asked me to read. It was the original edition of Ludwig Leichhardt's book about his voyage from Moreton Bay to Port Essington in the years 1844-45. In it I had read how, with much sorrow, he had left at the township Victoria the bullock Redmond, who was the hero of that remarkable voyage of over two thousand miles.

It was Redmond who carried the load of camp-gear belonging to the party, and only he of all the other animals survived that journey. It was he who saved the party by charging out

from some undergrowth on to the attacking natives, only the lily lagoon's sheltering waters saving the surprised and terrified ringleader as he dived into it for safety. Leichhardt wrote in his diary that when they were without food "We could not kill him for meat, for we loved him", and again, as a tribute to Redmond he wrote, "I am certain we would have been killed long ago if it were not for Redmond."

Redmond figured a great deal in Leichhardt's diary, and the last we read about him was that he lay down a short distance from Victoria township at Port Essington, and there the explorer left him, with instructions that he be treated well.

This Territory owes a lot to its cattle and its cattlemen, but the Redmonds of the past are forgotten in the new order of things



## CHAPTER XXI

### THE MACASSAN PATTERN

ONE NEED NOT be long in Arnhem Land to note the Malayan influence among the aborigines. When I first went to Groote Eylandt in 1922 the cra of the "Orangmungatruwas" was fresh in the minds of the Islanders. Many of their surnames were Malayan, as were the names of the big trepang camps around the island—which was known to these seafarers as "Daulumpu".

When gathering trepang at one of the big Malayan camps of Bojwearne in the south bay of Bickerton Island, I heard a very old man, of the "Ingani" totem, tell a story he had heard as a lad from his mother Old Yamboka's story, which was interpreted by a Macassan who was working for me as a smoke-house attendant, was of this very camp, and concerned an incident that first brought trade between these aborigines and the men from Macassa.

#### *The Trading Begins*

"Many years ago," commenced Yamboka, as he pulled a puff of tobacco from his long elyarra pipe, "long before I was born, the men from the port of Macassa came into this land and anchored at this place. My people were frightened of them at first, but after a time they would creep to the hill-tops nearby to watch carefully the movements of these fishermen.

"My people noticed how they left their cooking camp each night, to camp on the east side of the bay at that place of the flat rock carved deep with their symbols, and at daylight, with their heavy 'liba-libas' (canoes) lashed together for stability, and under a full spread of sail, they would trawl down the strong south-east winds towards their camps, every now and then lifting the nets off the bottom to take out the trepang and shell caught in the drag.

"My people also noticed that it was nearly midday before the weighted canoes reached the smoke-house camp on the west shore, where they boiled the trepang in the big cast-iron

'tundungs' and prepared it for the smoke-house. After this they went and gathered wood for the fires of the smoke-house.

"For days they watched the trepangers, and when they knew their every movement they planned to attack them.

"The attack caught the fishermen by surprise, for my people waylaid them as they gathered wood, and the Captain, who was foolish enough to be on shore at the time, was soon overtaken and killed, for the only weapons they had in those days were the barbed spear, such as ours, and a brass cannon on the 'Midjeanga' (prahu) used by the Captain.

"But when my clan went to the 'midjeanga'," continued Yamboka, "they found two young Malay lads about nine years old crouching in the hold amid the 'birdja' (rice) and, fearful of the things they had just done, they pitied them and returned with them to the camp.

"Anxious to be away from the scene of the fray, they took everything of value from the camp and 'midjeanga' and brought the Malay lads over to the Island of Dalumpu, and near Upamudja they initiated them into our tribe by circumcision. And as the months went by they were quick to learn our ways.

"So the rain-times went by, and as they did so these Malayan lads taught my people how to prepare the turtle- and pearl-shell for the time when these people would return to our shores.

"They explained to us that we must store them up in caves, and when the traders returned they would give us much trade for these things that are desired in their country.

"And then came that day when the Macassans returned, and as they anchored in Upamudja my father's father hung the best of the turtle-shell around the two Malayans' necks with string, and with our best 'Alamugga' (bark canoe) they sent them out to their countrymen. As they paddled out my people waited on the shore.

"Great was the surprise and joy at that meeting. The story recorded by my tribe tells of the big exchange of trade. And ever afterwards our people lit grass fires around the trepang camps when they saw the heavily laden 'midjeangas' come into sight from the 'Barat' (northward), for by this signal our trading friends knew that we were friendly and ready for trade."

Old Yamboka himself had been to the port of Macassa. He had been taken away before he had been circumcised and had lived and married in the Celebes, of which Macassa is the home port. He often told us of his trips to the cold north "where the sea was as stone", and mentioned in passing that he had sailed with whalers past the Island of Jipangu, where it was dangerous to land. As I heard his stories, often confirmed by the Macassan with me, I wish I had had the time to record his tales of that last seventy years in this and other lands.

#### *The Macassan arrives at Australia*

When in Darwin during my trepanging days I would lay the sailing ship *Iolanthe* up on the beach for repairs, and from an old Malay man called Carl Pon, who lived on Joly's Beach, I heard more about these Macassan trepangers.

"They came," Carl explained, "on the north-west wind, the Commandant's prahu in the lead with the others in a long line sailing behind him. They sailed to the north of Melville Island, to anchor at the assembly point of Trepang Bay. The size of the ships varied from ten to sixty tons burthen, and their arrival was a signal for grass fires by the aborigines and the movement to the shore-line of tribes from inland.

"From Trepang Bay they sailed to Bowen Straits where the Government of South Australia had established a tax depot, first in charge of a Mr. Robinson and then by Alf Brown who was well-known to the aborigines of Arnhem Land."

#### *The Macassan at the tax place*

When returning to the trading grounds, I often camped with Alf at his trepang camp at "Yeragul". He was, for a time, the "Landing Waiter" at the depot to collect the taxes from the Macassan trepangers.

"When the prahus came in from the west," began Alf, "the Commandant—head of the fleet—would come ashore to pay his dues, generally in gold, but if this were not to be had he paid in kind—which, at the latter part of the Macassan trading days on these shores, was at the rate of a picul (one hundred and thirty pounds weight) to the amount of six shillings and eightpence.

"The Commandants were always gaudily dressed as they



A woman of Arnhem land (*See Chapter XXIII*)



Aboriginal stockmen make excellent drivers (See Chapter XVII)



Aboriginal children in mock battle enjoy themselves in their rugged environment (See Chapter XVIII)

came in to pay, and to uphold the prestige of the whites I always wore a brilliant suit of pyjamas made by the Chinese tailors in Darwin.

"The meetings of the Commandant with the tax collector were always formal, and according to the worth of the Commandant so were the places allotted to his fleet."

As for the behaviour of the Macassans, Alf informed me that "If the fleet was the property of a merchant Rajah in the Celebes, generally in the Gulf of Boni, the crew were orderly because they were warned before they left with their ships that they were out for trade and not for women." It was the isolated ships, which were uncontrolled, that caused trouble with the natives in most cases.

Alf's description of the prahus were that they were "of varying tonnage from ten to sixty. They were well built in the Malayan style, with tripod masts which were lowered when at anchor, and carrying large lateen sails of cloth or woven straw.

"The running blocks were just 'dead-eyes' and the anchor was mostly a ring of rattan fastened to a large stone that was generally buried in the sand or mud by a man going down with the anchor.

"The compass was a piece of horn scraped thin till it was transparent, at each end a piece of wood, and down the middle a string with a magnetic needle secured to it half-way down—a primitive gimble that allowed it full play in the roll of the ship.

"The cargoes were mostly rice and canoes. The latter were used to gather the trepang, and were then bartered to the natives for trade. Water was carried in jars and bamboo stems of varying sizes, and in them they also carried a preservative of cooked rice and tamarinds, the seeds of which formed the large groves of these trees to be found around every Macassan trepang site.

"The crew were only equipped with spears and knives, but the Commandant of the fleet had a brass gun mounted on his ship. They cooked their meals in a small enclosed space on a fireplace made of flat stones and sand.

"After payment of the taxes the fleet moved away to the trepang banks, and after the 'Wet' they returned on the south-east winds to sail for their homeland."

*The Crew of the Prahu*

From Joe Madrill, an old Malayan cook on one of the cattle stations in the Northern Territory, I heard the following tale:

"Long time ago," began Joe—and on checking up with others I found he meant about 1880—"I was a small lad in my mountain home in the Celebes. My people were very poor, so my sister and I went to the town of Macassa where I sold red eggs in the street.

"Then one day I met a Malay Man called Captain Pringa, and he asked me did I want a job cutting wood, and when I told him 'Yes' he bade me go down to the waterfront and go aboard a big ship laying up there.

"I went to the ship he described, and they gave me a big ferd and I went to sleep, to awaken next morning far out to sea, and as I looked back to the hills in the distance I knew that I would never more see my country.

"For many days and nights we sailed, till we came" to 'Maragu', that word which means 'blackfellow', and the place known to the whites as Goibourne Island."

Old Joe then explained that Captain Pringa was only the navigator and head-man of the stores on the ship. He had "Fishing-masters" on the ship who were under contract to him, and it was the duty of these masters to provide their own crew for the trepang fishing. Four fishing masters were on Captain Pringa's craft and he supplied all food and canoes to them, and they in return gathered the trepang from the banks, cooked and smoked it, and when bagged it was taken to the store-ship.

As the Fishing-master fed his crew and only received one-third of the trepang he collected, it was only too obvious that the crew received very little pay, while he himself was constantly in debt to the merchant at the home port.

Joe's master was a hard man, and became more so when he discovered that the young lad could not swim and was afraid of the salt water. He refused to feed him, and Joe was hard-pressed to survive. Two other Malayan lads gave him some of their food but, when they were discovered and soundly beaten up by the master, they decided to run away to the mainland in a broken canoe they had secretly patched up with mud and grass.

For days they fled from the wrath of their master. He dispatched natives after them, and they were only saved because they had landed in an area that was under a death taboo—which forbids any aborigine from nearing the place where a dead body lies on its stage in the burial tree.

But their luck in the pursuit did not hold, for they found that this taboo also prevented anyone from being near to help them, and lonely and hungry they wandered until Joe's two friends died of thirst; and when he himself was thirsty and crying beside a tree a black hand grabbed and held him by the arm. The hand belonged to a naked native woman, and as she held the struggling lad she called aloud to the others, who brought him water to drink and thus allayed his fears.

"Two rain times," continued Old Joe, "I been with them black people. They give me plenty food. Then white people from town heard about me, and I was a fool to have left them for they were so kind."

The aborigines who worked for us on trepanging over thirty years ago confirmed the things I heard, and most of them were emphatic that the big trepang fleets only worked Malay men, and at times employed coastal natives they knew, and that they never contacted the women. It was "the little fellow mudjeangas that were cheeky for women".

On Groote Eylandt I knew six old black men who had been to Macassa, but they had left that land over thirty years before—about 1895—and from them I heard how the trepang prahus worked their island.

One lay up at Upramudja and the other at a bay on the south-east side of the island now called Dailumpu. Still another lay at Bojweanie, the scene of Yamboka's tale.

At each of these central camps an anchoring stake was driven into the mud, and on to this the mudjeangas tied up for the season. The one at Upramudja was still in place when we worked there.

From these "supply ships" the master-fishermen went out to establish their own camps on the trepang beds round about; the places were equally divided, and as the time drew near for the departure the fishing-masters brought in their trepang. At the central camp the trepang was dyed red with black man-



grove bark for preservation and to boost its price in the Chinese markets as a better grade "fish"

At the dyeing place each fishing-master was given his apportioned lot as his pay-off, and when all was ready the natives who had helped them were given a pay-off of canoes and rice, and a grog called by the natives "Anagee". And with the final payments and farewells the prahus would sail out before the south-east winds for their home parts.

## TRADE TRIBAL PATTERN

WITH EVERY RACE "trade goods" are the objects the people require, and the paths these goods come along are called "trade routes".

These trade routes in the Northern Territory run for hundreds of miles, and along them come the articles of trade desired by the tribesmen, and just as each tribe is noted for its particular trade, so do the tribespeople recognize the "song cycle" that goes with the trade.

The time of the season determined the trading, and as each group of aboriginal traders moved out with their wares they were always led by their best "song-man", who chanted his latest "hits" as they moved along.

Thus did the rhythm of their chant denote the trade. The "Wonga" chants denoted the bamboo spears of the Daly River area, the "Irarapinji" rhythms told of the "bi-faced" spear-heads from the head waters of the Victoria River, the "Walakas" were chanted by the boomerang traders, and the "Webas" meant the spear-heads from the flint quarries by the "Matta-merta" (Koplatong River of Blue Mud Bay).

And just as the chants denoted the trade, so was all trading governed by traditional kinship ties of brother trading with his inter-tribal brother. Perhaps this idea arose—long before the present subsection system was introduced to govern the tribal relationship—from the fact that a man when entering a strange tribe must always have a sponsor in the tribe he was entering. That man would naturally be called his tribal brother, and only through him could he talk, act and trade.

This taking of a tribal brother in the past sprang from the custom which laid down a law that "They who first see a person's footprint on the earth shall control that person's destiny". This was something similar to the law of salvage with canoes on Melville Island.

Should a native woman leave her family or tribe, and in

running away her tracks be seen by another man, then he would track her down and claim her under the above law. Should he have other men with him at the time, then he must let them mate with her, once only, before he established his claim to her.

If the rightful husband should come upon the pair—even if years have passed by—and ask for her return, then he who found her claims his right under the "Geramilla law".<sup>1</sup> This law lays down that if the ex-husband wishes to get his wife back he must pay—as a form of trade—goods or money until the other is satisfied he has been compensated enough for "minding her over the years". Should he reject the goods and refuse to give her up, then the case must be discussed by their kindfolk when they meet at the next trade ritual.

With the aborigines of many northern tribes, sex, marriage and trade are similar, and all sprang from the same idea—equality of barter.

I well remember how a young native girl of the Djouan tribe—in an excess of zeal—tapped a Waddaman man in a "Wal-laka" trade ritual, and as a result of the "ritual wounding" he playfully demanded payment. As she had no goods he pressed for her as a "Bougali" (sweetheart), and only because her friends could pay in goods did he relinquish his claim.

Trade played a very important part in aboriginal life, forever making itself felt in all customs and rituals. When visiting traders arrived, they would camp a little apart from those who were anxious to trade with them, and each night the "song-man" would chant his songs as the others listened, and gradually the clans would come together for the ritual trading, and as they chanted and performed their totemic dances the trade would flow through the inter-tribal brother line.

The method was simple. A wife of one of the visiting traders would join in the dance and deliberately tap her husband's inter-tribal brother—who is naturally, by tribal law, her inter-tribal husband—and as she tapped him he would laughingly demand a payment for this act. For this ritual tapping her husband must pay in kind, and failing this he must allow his wife to sleep with the trader. As sex did not enter into the proceedings,<sup>2</sup> he handed over his trade goods,<sup>3</sup> and when this was done the other brother's wife would repeat the ritual, with

<sup>1</sup> Called this name by many tribes to the south-west of Darwin.

the subsequent demand for payment and the exchange of goods.

As this trade went on the "song-man" kept everybody happy, and as a final gesture of goodwill these trading chants would be traded to the best song-man of the visiting tribe. When the initial traders returned to their country they would take with them a new traded song and the goods that also went with that song, thus one could hear tribal chants hundreds of miles away from their place of origin, still sung in the original language that nobody in that area understood.

On Groote Eylandt, when the canoes of the mainland traders came in, I often watched them at their trade, and it was interesting to see how the flow of goods went through the kinship lines.

On Groote Eylandt our own trade was always standard. The shell was taken off the back of the "Tongaluwa" (turtle-shell), and after being cleaned and strung on a piece of string by the hunters it would be brought in as trade at so much for a "back". The price was determined by the quality, which the natives understood as well as we did.

This was a form of tribal trade that went on for years. The values did not alter, because not governed by the law of supply and demand as in the case of our goods. During the war years I once saw a soldier pay out an excessive price for a boomerang. I asked the native his opinion on this, but he explained to me that the big price did not make the articles more valuable in the future but only showed him how stupid were many of the white people who did not understand these things.

The natives have a fixed idea about this: trade must only come from trade, and they who give for nothing only do so because they have no use for the thing given away.

Over the past years the aborigines of Arnhem Land were a group of clans whose beliefs centred around some permanent spring or water-hole. Their social customs have been studied by many anthropologists who were well capable of doing the job; but it was the Macassans and their trade who first gave them the power to rule rough-shod over the natives from the inland, who came to trade with those who were the medium of exchange between the Macassans and the inland trading aborigines.

Experience with aborigines in our own contact areas shows

that as a tribe becomes debilitated through contact the stronger outside tribes take command to resume the trading. The Sunday business of the Daly River is an example of this forward movement today.

As a result of contact and trade, tribal ideas were exchanged and new terms traveled inland for considerable distances, and today we find many Malayan words in the interior that have been passed along the trade routes.

From the following we must see that the flow of trade articles in Macassan days was to the south, where they were traded to the inland aborigines, who exchanged for these Macassan goods their tribal rituals supposed to give strength and power to those who possessed them.

This ritual for trade articles ever goes on, for only recently I witnessed a Gua bone ritual on Goulbourn Island that was given as a form of trade to these mission people, and the names of many of these rituals are governed by Macassan terms.

The term for the local rituals is but the Malayan word "Dua" (ancient), and "Yeritja", the term for the opposite moiety, is the Malayan word "Yeritjan" (the master of a trading vessel).

Thus do all the ancient things come under the "Dua" class, and stone-axes, bark-canoes, cane baskets, stone knives and all those things of their tribal lands, including tribal ritual, are things of the "Dua"; and the introduced inland rituals and all Malayan trade are the things of the "Yeritja" or trading people.

All Arnhem Land is packed tight with the "Yeritja" rituals that have become part of their religious beliefs, and in 1945 I saw the "Mother-place" of a Kunapippi "Yeritja" ritual at Yerakala Mission, and was told by an informant there that this was the remains of one of these rituals which had just been introduced into their land.

The Macassan had traded for years with the people of Arnhem Land. In 1803 Matthew Flinders records seeing their prahus anchored in the Malay roads—called so by him after the incident. He mistook them for pirates from the Ladrone Islands and ordered the guns of the *Investigator* to be manned as he sailed upon them. But he discovered them to be ships from the Gulf of Boni in the Celebes. The Captain of the ships was a Malay called "Pabasso", and the island near the place of that meeting is named Pabasso after that man.

Pabasso informed Flinders that the large Macassan fleet then trepanging along that shore-line from "Lamba Caraja"—Port Essington—to "Dena Seedi" (Vandalin Islands) numbered sixty prahus and that they had been coming to this area for over thirty years, the then Commandant of the fleet being one "Suloo".

And as the Macassana came down to trade on the north-west and returned on the south-east winds, these trade breezes became uppermost in the Arnhem Land people's minds, and as a result were called the winds of Yeriya, or trade. And as the trepang-camps along the coast became the centres of trade so did they become known as Yeriya places, and the articles such as mirrors, wool, iron-axes, canoes, sails, nails, etc., that were exchanged at these trading centres were called Yeriya goods. As these articles of trade were exchanged for the rituals and magic of the inland people so did the exchange rituals become the Yeriya rituals.

In reverse order did the ancient things of the land become "Dua", for along these ritual routes long before the Macassan visited these shores the trade of stone-spear heads and stone-axes came, to be traded for the red ochres and grinding stones of these people.

In 1907 the Macassan traders were debarred from these shores, and they left behind the complex trading system that had grown up over the years between the aborigines of Arnhem Land and the interior. This loss was a very great blow to the prestige of the head traders among the aborigines, and out of it came the flare-up of racial hatred between the whites and the natives.

The trouble was obviously brought about by a breakdown in the aborigines' local economy. Their traditions for over one hundred and fifty years were with the Malay trepanger. His trade goods made the aboriginal head-men powerful, and his "anagee" and tobacco kept them contented, but when this was abruptly shut down the Macassana told the natives it was the fault of the white people. This was indeed a fact, for all the white trepangers I met discontinued the supply of "grog", claiming that it was "too difficult to get it themselves".

But that excuse did not prevent the killings and avenging wars that went on along the shore-lines. During 1922-29—the

period my mate Horace Foster and I traded along the eastern shore of the Gulf of Carpentaria—sixteen traders and their crews were killed. Many white people, not understanding the real reason behind it all, claimed it was over women, yet all the time we were there no native in our area ever offered to trade his women with us; a strange thing this, when one realizes that it was the common practice with many tribes on the northern shores and in the interior.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ARNHEM LAND

THE GREATER PART of Arnhem Land is an aboriginal reserve, the north-western boundary of which is at Bowen Straits. It is an area of 34,000 square miles with, here and there on the boundary, the Aboriginal Mission Stations of Goulburn, Milngimbi, Yirrkalla, Elcho Island, Groote Eylandt, Roper River and Oenpelli, all controlling—when I patrolled that area in 1945—1,230 adults and nearly 943 children.

The interior is formed of rugged sandstone hills with occasional outcrops of granite, as at the King River and the north-eastern portion of the country, while the shore-lines and the peni-plains leading up to the hilly country are of ironstone laterites—covered with the usual Northern Territory timbers of messmate and woollybutt—and swamp-lands with their lily lagoons and wild-fowl.

First discovered as far back as 1572, the shore-line was visited from time to time, and the names of such places as Groote Eylandt, Maria, Van Diemen, Wessel and also its own name, on the charts, tell the story of those early navigators.

From early times the Macassans came and traded, but when they departed at the beginning of this century the white traders came and remained until it was declared an aboriginal reserve in the early ninety-thirties.

Much has been written about Arnhem Land, but most of it was written from the deck of a boat, the veranda of a mission, or from the archives in the big public libraries.

Captain Lawson of the ship *White Star* often told me of his trips to the Goyder River, and the Florida cattle station when it was managed by Darcy Ewer in the latter part of the last century.

All this area, for thousands of square miles, had been taken up as a cattle property, and looking over the big lagoons and swamp-plains around, with the smoke of the aborigines rising above the trees in the distance, Darcy had told him a little of the hardships they were encountering in this area.



Markets were too distant, and nomadic aboriginal hunters of cattle were ever making the herds restless.

"Easy," Darcy explained to Lawson, "to reach this place by boat, but it is a long stretch from the Roper River police station where the stock route traverses the Wilton and twists for two hundred miles through the hills to reach this spot."

In *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*, Gilbert White, Bishop of Willochre, writes of a time in 1907 when he went to the Roper River to establish a mission.

"I had asked Mr. R. (meaning Rogers), the manager of Hodson Downs, to come over and see me, and soon after breakfast he arrived with Mrs. R., their little boy and a cavalcade of four stockmen, twelve black boys and the wives of four of them . . . on their way to remove the last of the cattle from the Arafura (Florida Station)."

One of the stockmen in that party was a friend of mine called Billy McCall, and it was he who told me about the natives spearing and disturbing the herds of cattle on that station in Arnhem Land.

But those cattlemen riding behind the herds into that land brought back tales of gold and minerals, for some of them had read Tenison Woods' report in which he stated that, "he doubted if many provinces will be found so singularly and exceptionally favoured as Arnhem's Land in respect to mineral riches", and imaginations were inflamed when a story came through that a stockman, heading straight for the Katherine River police station, had been found dead with a piece of gold stone in his swag, and they who buried him knew by its texture that it was from some new field.

So the prospectors rode out to search; and searching, they found the Bulman lead show at the head of the Wilton.

Then Doctor Geologist Brown wrote a glowing report of the gold-bearing country round Caledon Bay, and away went the prospectors in that direction; among them Billy McCall of the Arafura days. And I met old Tom Fuller at Anthony's Lagoon in 1919, who told me of a prospecting party he had led many years before in that area, and how he camped one night with some Maayan trepangers at a place called Anjeboi—the Macassan's name for Caledon Bay.

After the prospecting boom had died down, a search was

made for cypress pine around the Liverpool River area by a man called Murphy, and six years afterwards Elcho Island Mission was established—to be abandoned shortly afterwards owing to a supposed oil find near the missionaries' home, and these people moved over to Milngimbi, Island of the Crocodile Group.

Then came the hue and cry about the white women of Arnhem Land, brought about by the complete disappearance of the *Douglas Mawson* in a violent cyclone in the year 1922, and the alleged seeing of these white women by some natives who were clever enough to use the tale to get plenty of food-stuffs from the Government anxious to investigate every rumour.

The Arnhem Land legend burst into full flame at this time. Killing of traders became frequent, and the "experts" in the south were full of advice as to what should be done.

Missionaries hit the headlines with "Peace expeditions", and the Government sent police officers Bridgeland and McNamara to Caledon Bay to see what could be done about the matter.

The killing of the traders went on merrily, until McColl of the Northern Territory Police Force was killed on Woodah Island. And out of it all the Government declared the whole of Arnhem Land an aboriginal reserve.

But all this time the missionaries were plodding away. Wilber Chaseling formed a mission near Cape Arnhem, and an American anthropologist called Lyode Warner came to Milngimbi and out of his research wrote an excellent book, called *Black Civilizations*. Webb of Milngimbi also wrote a book of his experiences called *From Spears to Spades*. The title was a good one, but I am afraid that every time I visited the place the natives were carrying more spears than spades.

Dr. Donald Thompson was sent from the south to investigate the whole of the question, but by that time, about 1935, the legend had died down and all was peaceful once more.

However, unbeknown but to a few, an old white man called Doctor Bloomfield, in 1933 left the Roper Bar to follow the old Arafura stock trails over Arnhem Land into Florida station homestead—now a ruin—"just to have a look at the country".

With a few horses and some Roper River natives to help him, he rode up the western shore-line of the Gulf of Carpentaria,

and passing close to the shores of Blue Mud and Caledon Bay he headed across to Milngimbi mission station, which he reached in June of the same year. After a rest at that place he continued on his way along the old stock route of the Arafura days, finishing his eight hundred miles of travel at the Roper River police station. The newspapers gave him little headline publicity, for his trip was uneventful and, as such, not "news".

He died *en route* to Sydney after his great trip.

About this time somebody discovered pearling beds on the coral reefs off-shore, and a few years afterwards the foreign pearling luggers came in from the north, and as they came the Arnhem Land natives lifted the sails on their canoes to barter with the traders as in the days gone by.

The Government, trying to cope with this contact, established watering bases along the shore-line, with a warning that only at those places could the luggers approach the shores, and a Government-owned vessel patrolled the seas around these areas.

But the same old story as on Melville Island was enacted, and the contact went on at places other than the watering bases. The story of how one of these pearl-ers was caught, and the legal battle that raged over the event, is too well known to be repeated. So the contact goes on, and as I write the prospectors are once more riding, or motoring, over the land.

But those shore-lines of Arnhem Land ever remind me of things other than trading wars, for just as the lines and notches on an aborigine's message-stick remind the bearer of the stick of the sender's requirements, so do certain headlands and bays bring back memories of the past.

De Courcy Head, a few miles from Bowen Straits, brings memories of days and nights when the sailing lugger *Iolanthe* weathered the turbulent waters as we tried to round the headland in the south-east gales.

History records that an aborigine was hanged on the beach here as a salutary lesson to the others over the killing of Malays, and as we battled those heavy seas I often wondered if his spirit was taking revenge on the white people for this dark deed.

How the booms jumped up and down in the "topping lifts", as the sheet blocks rattled on the deck at each jolt of a ship

that groaned as it laboured in the heavy seas. And as the after leaches of the sails beat a tattoo as they "spilled out the wind" from the straining canvas, I could see the aboriginal steersman sitting complacently on the deck as he balanced the strain of the tiler-rope against the pull of the mizzen sail.

Those aboriginal dwellers of the sea shore were good seamen, for years of hunting on the sea had given them the feel of the ocean. Stoics in adversity, they could keep awake if needed, and sleep on anything when they had need to rest.

A calm sea and a warm day would have them fast asleep, but let someone see a turtle riding on the sea ahead and instantly they are all up, striking various positions as the hunter does during the kill. All are talking excitedly and giving instructions as we sail on. Native women on board are, in imagination, gathering up wood around their camp to cook the flesh, and the children are whispering to each other amid the din.

Should the creature be too far away for us to get, and we sail by, then all retire once more to their various places and quiet reigns again; but let our ship gade over the turtle and a hush descends as one of the crew perches in the bow, then—"Splash"—he is in the water and has grasped the unsuspecting creature by the neck, and by levering this upward forces it to swim along the surface. As it moves off a maze of shouted instructions are given as a rope is thrown to the swimmer, who ties it fast to the turtle's leg. Now all are laughing as they haul the creature on to the *Iolantha*. Everyone is proclaiming that it was they who saw it first, and all re-enact the turtle swimming in the sea, how they saw it and what they would have done "only 'nother one beat me first time".

Of course a turtle kill means that we must stop at the first convenient anchorage, and that night what a roaring fire on the shore and what loud laughter as the piles of flesh are eaten.

But this eating of such food recalls that even on the sea these native people have food taboos. The seas around North Goulburn Island are said to be crammed with poisonous fish, and as we passed by that area fish diet was "off", and the Malays on the luggers would haul in their towing lines until we were free from the curse. An island in that area is called "Pouson Island", and the legend about that place would perhaps tell us how this taboo arose.

The taboo on sea foods was fairly common, and at times completely unreliable. Around Groote Eylandt the hawk-bill turtle was said to be poisonous, yet on Vanderlin Island to the south I have seen natives eat it with relish, while the toad-fish which is said to be dangerous around the Vanderlins and elsewhere was eaten on Groote Eylandt.

And just as taboos differed with the tribes, so did those people's dispositions and ability to work alter greatly from tribe to tribe. When I was trepaning on Groote the natives were good and reliable workers and the women were never employed, yet on the mainland the women were always ready to work while the men just sat and brooded over their grievances of past days. I am certain it was this thing that made the Groote Eylanders so trustworthy in the past and the Caledon natives completely opposite.

But no more do the trepaning luggers sail along the coast of Arnhem Land, watching for smoke signals on the shore to inform them that the natives are waiting beside the trepaning banks of their tribal lands. Old Alf Brown died in far-away Adelaide, and the others rest in lonely graves over the broad face of the Northern Territory. Crocker Island is now a settlement and school for half-caste children, and the Timor ponies that Alf let loose are racing in their hundreds over the grassy plains beyond Palm Beach, while some of them have been "broken in" by the schoolboys who use them for riding over the island.

And now, away from it all, I sometimes remember the days when I travelled hundreds of miles along its beaches, rivers and into the interior; those days when the native crew-men and I battled in the strong south-east winds that swept along its shores, and the trepang camps where I would be awakened by the call of the butcher bird as he chirruped "He's got it . . . he's got it" into the dawn; of the north-east breezes that came with the falling of petals from the coral trees, and that time when the white blooms of the cabbage-gums whispered to the aboriginal hunters that the magpie-geese and whistling ducks were gathering in their thousands on the drying "Rakai" swamps.

'Twas then one could see, in the distance, the smoke signals



A missionary and the author talk over the tribal wounding of this "Nakara" man (See Chapter XX)



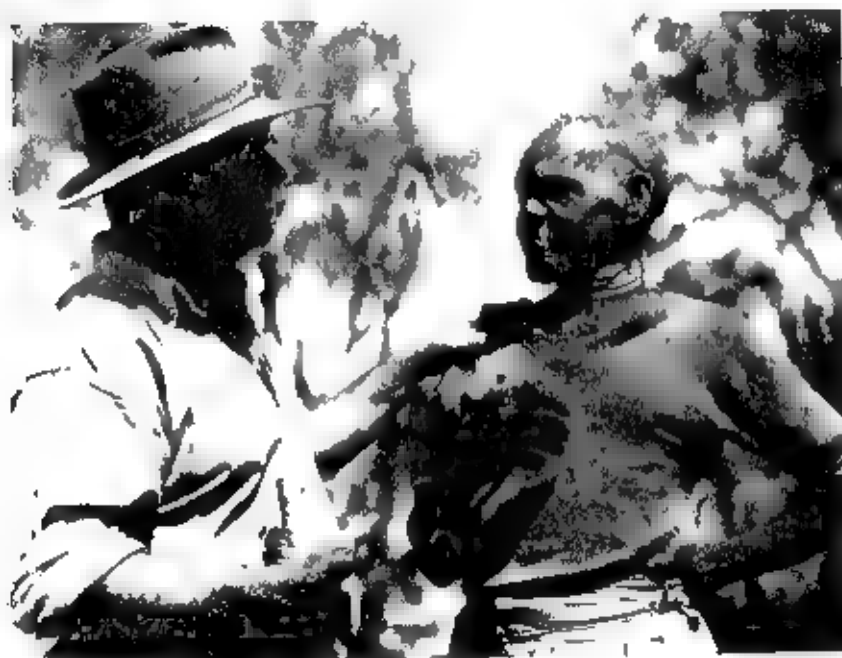
An Oenpelli hunter spearing fish from a paper-bark raft (See Chapter XIX)



Aboriginal hunter at desert rock-hole (see Chapter XXXIV)



Aboriginal youngsters  
enjoy themselves in the  
newly-built children's  
playground at Aber-  
crombie  
(See Chapter XXXI)



Whilst on patrol the author talks over a problem with a tribal elder

of the hunters as they gathered to the feast and the rituals that were a part of the daily round.

Today, as I see the magpie-geese flying overhead, I think of the native fishermen, standing on the rocky ledges of Welama, shouting to each other as they spear the giant travelling fish "Weakal" as the seething horde sweeps inshore at that spot.

Thinking of Welama, I remember the Groote Eylandt black man "Calcowa", who deflected with his "mungala" (throwing stick) the barbed spear that was thrown at me by an unseen aborigine in the jungle close by. The war over trade was on then, but I have since met those same natives and together we have laughed over that time when they scared the daylighters out of a "rubbish white fellow man".

But trading days have departed for the trepanger of Arnhem Land. The missions have taken control, and when visiting the many places on my patrol I am alternately happy at what I see or sad at the change in tribal customs.

Education, as the whites know it, has broadened the black people's minds on our way of thought, but the hunting plan has broken down as they cluster about the food stores of the missions whilst the Bible has displaced the epic song-cycles that recounted the glories of past days. Ritual and the tribal hunting patterns meant decentralization, but contact brought chaos and a drift from tribal lands.

The old order of Arnhem Land is past, and as the patrol vessel *Kuru* sails through the night I look into the rising moon towards the shore-line but see few camp-fires of the aboriginals gleaming upon its thousand miles of beaches, for most of them now live around the missions or are moving along its trade routes to the contact towns of Maranboy, Katherine, Pine Creek or Darwin—to which I too must ever return to write reports and get ready once more to travel overland amidst the cattle stations on an eastward patrol.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### INLAND PATROL

**D**RIVING OVER THE black soil plains between Newcastle Waters and Anthony Lagoon in the year 1946, three hundred miles south-west of Arnhem Land, I was amazed to observe that in all that one hundred and eighty miles of good pastoral land no beast of any description grazed on its grassy plains, and its original "Wombia" (plain-kangaroo) tribe had long since followed in the trails of their ancestors, or drifted off to become stockmen for the cattlemen.

Mangbirr, a water-man from the Timor sea beaches, who was with me at the time, could only shake his head and mutter as he looked over the treeless expanse we were traversing, "Can't finish plain, just like salt-water in my country."

Mangbirr recounted to me as we went along that a Wombia man, whom he had met at Newcastle Waters, had told him these plains were caused by a spirit who trapped the newly-arrived traveller by rolling the plains out before him as he walked along.

Scientists of course would only smile at Mangbirr's tale, and tell him a thing that he in turn wouldn't believe: that part of this Barkly Tableland was a sea-bed in Cambrian times, and a few hundred million years later parts of it were overlaid with the clays of a cretaceous era.

But, leaving fact and fancy, we do know that it is a wide black-soil Mitchell-grass plain intersected with red ridges—known to the locals as deserts—covered with snapping-gum, bloodwoods, turpentine bush and a red grass that grows between the blood-red antbeds and somehow thrives on its soils.

The highest parts of the Barkly are to the north and north-west, and its levels slope away to the southward by the continual drainage from river systems that have gradually silted

up those lakes now known to cattle-men as the "Brunette Lakes", and by the far greater erosion of the Ranken and Georgina Rivers that flow towards Lake Eyre.

For many years after this area was taken up it depended entirely on the natural waters from these river systems, but during the big droughts the cattle and horses had to be removed on to the head-waters of the coastal rivers that flow into the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This instability caused the cattle-owners to seek for water, and sub-artesian bores were put down with success, and thus was the country improved.

But although the cattle runs were improved, the role of aboriginal stockmen remained the same. They worked during the mustering period and went on "walkabout" during the "lay-up" season. It has often been said about the old black-fellow that he suffers from claustrophobia, and if this be true then his welfare—when I visited those places—was assured. I heard over and over again the same stock excuses—"The natives won't live in huts if they are built for them." But when I pointed to the tin huts they had built for themselves they countered by saying, "If somebody died in them they would become taboo." When I replied to this that "it was the owner's responsibility to see that they died in hospital or a sick bay at the station homestead" they came back with, "The native people are frightened to say when a person is sick because they would only become lost in the towns"—a thing I knew to be true.

Our first stop after travelling one hundred and eighty miles was Anthony's Lagoon on Creswell Creek. The Government is represented at this town of two houses by a Police Officer who provides law and order for about forty thousand square miles. Besides that work he was—during my visit—the stock-inspector and supervisor of the dipping of about fifty thousand head of cattle a year, and was—with his wife—the postmaster and medical adviser, the Protector of Aborigines, plus all sorts of extras thrown in to keep him, as the blacks would say, "proper lively".

His black-tracker Francis, with his wife Violet and their two children, were well to the fore on my arrival. Old friends of mine from Borroloola days, they talked about "salt-water side"

with its dugong feasts upon the beaches of Underwarra on South-West Island.

"Proper good country that one," excitedly from Violet, "I been tell musus all day", then with emphasis, "Can't finish talk about my country, good one . . . ain't it?" The last question is an appeal to me as Violet looks with scorn at Ron, "the Boss", who butts in with a playful, "Might be you gammon, him just rubbish."

Francis is a little grey now, in fact it is only when we meet our long unseen friends that we begin to realize how old we are getting. I think of Francis as a one-time Lothario, in the Borrooloola district, who was in great demand with the native girls—who considered him to be "properly pretty". I asked one once where he got his charm from, and she replied, "Him nose like white man, not like blackfellow."

The nose of Francis was certainly different from the average run of natives in that area, for it was thin and beaked like some of the desert natives.

I asked after other natives from the Borrooloola district, but learned that they were either dead or scattered over the Barkly Tableland on the cattle stations. As they gave out the names I wondered what urge must have driven them from their "properly good country" and sent them into this "different kind country".

I visited the Anthony's Lagoon homestead and saw a reminder of past days in the old cypress-pipe building that was once the Borrooloola store, and looking out over the plains I saw a herd of sheep that were descendants of the Government station flock at Mataranka in the Gilruth days. The old store had been pulled down and rebuilt here, and the sheep had passed from the Government to A. J. Beckett—one-time Protector of Aborigines—who took up the Vandalin Island to pasture the flock. Surely this Territory must be full of people who came with "hopes that ended in dreams".

But this Anthony's Lagoon produced one great man, and the deserted store of Charles Biondi, on the ridge above flood-mark, could tell stories of how this man went "broke" helping out the swagmen and dead-beats who passed that way in the 1929-32 depression.

From Queensland way they came, men without hope walk-

ing towards the setting sun, mechanics who had no motors to repair, horsemen without horses, clerks whose firms had gone broke and school-teachers who were now re-educated in the best way to survive on a handful of rice and a fat goanna.

But none of all this army passed by Charlie's store, as the blacks say, "empty finger". The old storekeeper gave out the tucker and also gave them what they most needed—hope in the future and a full belly to face that hundred and eighty miles to the next cattle-station and store at Newcastle Waters.

I said good-bye to Ron and his wife, also the Borrooloola mob, and after travelling twenty-six miles I was welcomed by the manager of Creswell cattle-station. George had lived here for years, and his name had become synonymous with this area: and that is how I find it is with many people in this land. They—like the aborigines around them—live upon the same patch of country all their lives. It is their country and they know its every mood. Mention Bert Drew, and instantly one pictures donkey-teams and the Victoria River Depot, I think of George Conway and my mind goes to the Roper River and the cattle runs upon it; Jimmy Gibbs means to me the Roper Bar and Urapunga cattle station; Nugget Morton calls to mind the desert lands, and George Darcy reminds me of the head-waters of the Macarthur River and the spring of Mulapunya where I stayed a night after leaving Creswell Downs.

George was a teamster who carted from the 'Loo—as Borrooloola was called—but with the advent of the motor he settled here to build up a great family and a cattle station, and it was at that place he explained to me how the white man's food is slowly killing off the natives on the cattle runs. It wasn't so much starving them as of making them contented with their lot and thus forgetting their tribal ways.

George explained it all to me. "In the bush the natives are always on the walkabout to get tucker. They know just what they can stand up to on a dry stage, and rarely do they get trapped by their reasoning. They understand the different heats in which to travel, and once started they rarely fail to get through to their destination." "But," he continued, "they get a job on the cattle stations, and by living there a long time on

station tucker they lose the art of judging things. Thus when coming to a dry stage they have traveled over in past days they get trapped."

He recounted how only recently some station natives were driving some goats from the Top Springs to the Kulgour Gorge water-holes, a distance of ten miles. They had travelled over this country many times before, but owing to the loss of their bushcraft they soon over-heated, and lay down under some mimosas bushes on the route and died.

George and I talked long into the night beside the Mula-punya Spring, and next morning I bade him and his family farewell and was away down the road as the sun came peeping over the white gum trees covering the stony ridges. And before long Mangbirr and I were winding along the bush road that led to the Macarthur River.

On our right the dull walls of the Abner Range were grey in the morning light. Here and there I could see dark patches of green winding down the sides of the mountain's craggy face, green glens made by the springs of water that trickled on to the flats below; and at a casuarina-lined water-hole in the river we camped for a meal opposite one of these places.

The sun was fairly high by this time, and its rays lit up the rocky wall of the range in a mass of colour. A craggy face in the mountain that somehow jutted out from the main range was called by the strange name of Cape Crawford, after a Macarthur station head-stockman who first rode up this spur on to the tablelands above.

Lindsay Crawford was one of those remarkable men who travelled far over this land ages ago. Old bushmen often talk of his exploits, and on the map of the Northern Territory—and elsewhere, perhaps, for he had been in New Guinea too—we see places named as a result of his wanderings.

I myself have crossed a river named after him on the north-south road, have climbed "Mungeraka" (Mt. Crawford) miles west of Alice Springs, branded cattle in Crawford's Yard beside his water-hole, and here is Cape Crawford to commemorate a feat he performed long before I was born. His name, like many other old-timers who crop up from time to time, has an air of mystery and romance about it.

Amid all those reminders of the past, we packed our tucker-

box once more, to travel on until we finally arrived at the old township of Borroloola, the one-time river port that served all this district and the western parts of the Barkly Tableland.

## CHAPTER XXV

# BORROLOOLA MEMORIES

### *Part I*

As I drove into Borroloola I thought about its past days; of its strange old white men who talked only of the past yet lived in the present, and the aborigines who reversed the process by talking of the present yet lived in the past.

The place had changed a lot since September 1919 when Jack Keighran, Nugget Morton and I drove our pack-horses into the town. To me the place was heaven after four years of war and a one-thousand-mile ride on horseback from Queensland.

Those were great days, and I can picture again our triumphal entry as—with much shouting and giving of orders—old black-fellows and young native girls kept pointing. "Good fellow camp" they shouted, while others said the same thing as they pointed in a different direction. Thus did we ride as they shouted. Two of the young girls who were pointing in different directions began shouting at each other, and a fight was only prevented by an old man who took over and led us off towards the river, and ere long we were crossing the stream at a place called the Leichhardt Bar.

I afterwards learnt that all the shouting and pointing at our entry was the result of rival river factions—called "Top" and "Down-side" mobs—striving for the possession of the "new-fellow travelling men" arriving with "gifts", which after all are the only things that define our status in present-day society be we white or black.

Our camp site at that time—the Macarthur River—was beside a large water-hole that rose and fell with a small tidal flow. Its banks were of red soil, with large white cedars—locally known as "Chestnuts" providing shade, and as we threw off the packs under one of these some blacks attached themselves to us and it wasn't long before they had the billy boiling.

One husky fellow called Tony and his wife Jinny soon had a shade made of posts and rails overlaid with green bushes, and within this, as a gesture to the "properly white fellows", Tony had made a table of forked sticks overlaid with a top of paper-bark.

After the dry lands we had just traversed, and living on corned beef and dampers amid swarms of flies, this change of country and living conditions was really regal. I lay back as the natives did my bidding and wondered why people ever left a land as peaceful as this.

My dreams were rudely disturbed by the shouts of the natives, who were pointing towards the east, and walking to a rise nearby I was surprised to see a patched-up motor-car chugging towards me in a cloud of dust.

As there was no road in the direction they were coming, I was just wondering who the hell they were when they pulled up at our camp, and going down I was greeted by two grubby-looking chaps who said their names were Hudson Fysh and McGinnis.

Jack had already put on the billy, and over a drink of tea they told us they were looking for an aeroplane route to start commercial flying. As no one in this land had ever thought about the idea before, the announcement that they were off to the moon would have given less surprise.

After a good "chin-wag", with us listening in amazement to their schemes, they started the old Ford going, and with much laughter we pushed them up the bank of the old river. As we returned to camp the blacks were full of inquiries, not about aeroplanes—which they had never seen and could not understand—but about the "buggy that go no more got horse" and the "different white fellow man".

Still full of talk about the "aeroplane mob", we were about to go for a swim when an old one-eyed white man came from his camp to inquire about the shouting and the funny noises he had heard.

Jack addressed him as "Slob"—short for "Slobbery"—and when he heard the "news" he remarked, "Wonder how the old blokes in the town'd take that bit of news." As he said it we all laughed at the picture of a meeting between men of bullock drays and men of the future.



We invited "Slob" to a drink of tea, and Nugget, who was excited at the vision of future events, was slammed down by "Slob" with a curt reminder that the thing was only a dream and a "rich man's toy".

As "Slob" was warming up to a subject that included inventions such as "perpetual motion", he rubbed his hand across his glass eye, then slipped something into his mouth, and as I watched I noticed the eye had disappeared.

I glanced at Nugget, who was transfixed by the scene. Old "Slob" then withdrew the glass eye from his mouth and returned it back to his eye-socket.

After "Slob" had gone back to his camp we talked about this to Jack, who scoffed at our weakness, declaring that "Slob" always did that when the eye irritated him, and it was a sort of reflex action "like picking yer nose and eating it".

"Slob's" camp mate was a chap called "Luggy", shortened to "Lug". He was a one-time school teacher, and claimed he had lost his ear by it being continually "bit" by drunken cadgers around the pub bar. "Lug's" hobby was poetry, and when drunk he went through a repertoire that lasted all night, or as long as he could stand on his feet. The night of our arrival was celebrated when he opened a home-made brew of wild bees' honey and a secret "knock-out". Blacks, and "Slob" on the arm of one he called "Mc Valet", came tottering and flying past our camp before a rattle of revolver shots, which "Slob" explained came from "Lug" as he gave a realistic rendering of "Dangerous Dan McGrew".

Next day I went for a walk down the river and, coming to a bark house beneath a sand-paper fig tree I heard my native companion mutter "Pleddy" as he rounded the fence and I strolled up to give greetings to the owner of the place.

The owner who bade me good day was of small stature, with a stubbly beard on a face toughened by years of battling these rivers and seas beyond. He was bare-footed and proud of it, claiming that "boots made a man think differently".

His name was not "Pleddy" but "Freddy", but by all the whites and blacks he was called "The Admiral", an appellation given to him because he was the boss of the river canoes and duly inspected and repaired them as they came by his camp on their way to the sea.

Freddy was the "proper big captain of the river", and at my arrival he called out to a native girl to "put on the billy for a drink of tea". As I sat under his fig-tree drinking this I gazed on green tidal waters below his garden, and vowed that one day I too would go down that stream to the sea and the islands of the Gulf.

The scene strongly appealed to me—the green shades of waters reflecting the Leichhardt, paper-bark and she-oak trees upon a calm surface, now and then disturbed by groups of naked black kiddies who dived into its cool stream from the overhanging trees.

As I watched the scene a ripple of waters spread over the surface, and shortly afterwards a native canoe went sailing by, its bag sail billowing out with the evening breeze, and the native steersman tugging on to the steering paddle as he held his ship on to its course.

"Old Mudjala up from the islands with some dugong," from the "Admiral", "he always brings some up for the old blokes at the town, makes 'em good bunji (happy)."

His flow of conversation was interrupted by laughter from a young native girl who was sitting under a gum tree nearby, so he called her over and with a smile remarked, "Here's a good sort of young fellow for yer, Bonny, he wants a sweetheart"—then, jokingly, "Him new-fellow man."

I looked over my pot of tea at the girl, who was shyly twisting her bare foot into the earth as she looked at me, and as I smiled she answered in a sweet, musical voice, "S'pose him like . . . me try him."

"A proposal and an acceptance," laughingly from the "Admiral", as he handed her a pannikin of tea and a bit of tobacco. Then turning to me his voice changed as he asked, "Good country this, ain't it?" His question was not in a joking manner, but came straight from his heart. "I been here since the beginning of the century—came to here from the Georgina River—too dry out there—here plenty of water and——" He did not finish his sentence, but looked instead at the waters of the river with its laughing, shouting children, and as he looked I, too, followed his gaze to the far horizons that ended in our dreams.

So I left the "Admiral" and joined Tony lower down, and

as we walked along a low cough came from behind us, and looking that way I saw Bonny, with the pearly teeth and smiling eyes, tramping on my footprints as she followed. I asked Tony why this was, and he jokingly explained it was always done by a girl when she wished to convey to the others that the owner of those tracks belonged to her and he was her "proper boy friend".

Then we came to a blacks' camp at the spring of water called "Mulinderra" and I saw, for the first time, the natives from "Salt-water side" with their hunting gear and canoes anchored amid the reeds that lined the banks of the stream.

No hungry-looking people here: all was action, for they were building up their cooking fires and preparing the large ground-ovens for the piles of dugong flesh that lay on beaches beside their camps amidst a swarm of laughing children and snuffing dogs.

I met an old native at that spring whose lower jaw had been shot away in a battle with the whites ages ago. He was slightly deformed about the mouth, and I could not help inquiring how he survived such an ordeal. They explained that he had escaped with the help of his young wife, who had carried him away and kept him alive in the bush until the trouble had died down. His only doctor was Nature, but his wife helped by hunting his food, then when it was cooked she would chew it well and drop each ball of the mess into his gaping mouth, and with a blunt-ended stick she would carefully push it down his throat until the neck-muscles took over and forced it into his stomach.

As an old native told me thus I heard a great commotion going on a little distance away. Tony looked casually that way and remarked, "Pulling out business."

This "pulling out business" was a sort of recognition of tribal marriage, but it looked to me at that time a rough way of "publishing the banns", for all I could see was a tough-looking black man pulling a screaming girl over the ground towards his camp while the rest looked calmly on as though it were an everyday affair.

As Tony was explaining this—that it was tribal, and if anyone objected to this "pulling out" the girl would be allowed to go—I heard a white voice exclaim, "What are you doing here,

lad? You know it's against the law to be found in a blacks' camp—get out!"

I looked in the direction of the voice, to see a muddle-aged white man—who Tony afterwards said was the "Lawyer"—and a man in khaki uniform whose badge told all he was of the Northern Territory Police. Needless to say I just "got out" as fast as I could down the track, vowing in my injured pride just what I would do if ever I should be able to get in charge of the natives of this part. I cursed the law then, but I found out afterwards that that same policeman was a really good fellow, about whom the natives said "Good fellow man—no more soft binji", which meant that he was hard but just.

### *Part 2*

Next morning my mates and I went up to see the "old blokes in town" old "Slob" had told us about.

Near the hotel—an old building built from cypress pine—we came upon a stock-plant with its green-hide pack-saddles and bags lying over the ground. Some native women in riding trousers were sitting round a cook fire where an older woman was scraping the ashes away from the lid of a cast-iron camp-oven. They called out something in their own language to a white man who was asleep in his swag on the hotel veranda, and as they did so he reared up among the blankets to survey us.

We called out "Good morning", and on his introducing himself we knew him as a great cattle-man and poddy-dodger from the Lemmun River country to the west.

"You the blokes what brought in the blacks yesterday?" he questioned, and as we attempted to explain that they had only followed, he went on, "Good job they come in . . . these old gun-cranks who rule this place won't give anyone a smile or a bit of credit unless they hear the blacks pulling their didgeredus all night . . . real hell of a place . . . can't get a booze . . . blacks away and me as dry as a wooden god—" He broke off his tirade when he heard some shuffling behind a wooden door with a weathered sign above it which read "BAR"; then flinging a boot at it he shouted, "Open up fer crise sake, get out of bed and let the wind blow some of the

gin's sweat off yer blankets . . ." He was about to let another boot fly when the door opened, and an irate voice exclaimed, "What the hell's wrong, Sly, can't yer wait?"

The old man in the doorway was about seventy-five years old, and as we looked in his direction he addressed us, "You anything to do with that bunch of blokes that are talking of flying over the country . . . damn lot of rat-bags . . . What yer want—a drink?"

His remarks and questions came out in a sort of jumble, but when we explained that we never boozed, he thawed out a little, "Then you're the coves from the Tableland what were followed by all the 'Jackies' . . . come in because the boat must be coming with tucker . . . they're like crows that can scent a kil for miles . . . sort of telephathy."

"Telephathy be buggered, Tom Lynott," from the cattle-man Sly; "they have just come in to wheedle a bit of scran out of you old fools who ain't happy unless they're all around yer."

Old Tom ignored the accusation as he pointed to a large galvanized iron bunding about fifty yards down the river. "Store there, but yer'll find no tucker in it till the boat comes from Darwin. Me brother Cliff is in there. See yer later."

We took the hint and walked down to the store he had pointed out, and passing by a group of natives in every degree of nakedness we went up the stairs, to be greeted by four very old men who were perched upon the long and empty counter.

We introduced ourselves, but we could see that youth was not desired in this land of the aged. From their conversation we found that one was called Cliff, one I already knew as "The Lawyer", another was addressed as "Channy", and the other was an old hawk-like fellow who was ever on the move as he talked and was known to them all as "Old Scrutt". They were a strange crowd in that store that day, ever talking in whispers and peering through a nail-hole in the building to see what was going on among the blackfellows outside. Their ages had me guessing, but I found out afterwards that their combined ages—together with Tom the publican and a Chinese gardener "Ki-an"—who was said to be as old as China's wall—amounted to over four hundred and thirty years.

I walked round the inside of the store, and as I did so Old

Scrutt slipped away into a dark corner of the place and relieved himself against the galvanized iron wall that was rusted through by this usage. Old Scrutt glanced slyly as he saw me, and remarked something about Tolstoy and his writing that "even the Czar cannot hold his water".

He returned to the counter, I with him, and it was then I first noticed a small bottle with a screw top through which a wick came. It was burning a small flame, and as I looked one of the men bent down to light his pipe. To Nugget's inquiries they explained that "in a land of no matches it was either this or carrying a fire-stick about".

That lamp was always burning when no matches were in town. Beside it was a young native girl, whom Old Scrutt jocularly called "Vesta-defloris", and it was her duty and that of the other girls to keep the flame alight.

While Jack and Nugget were finding out about the boat—a subject all wanted to talk about and of which nobody knew anything at all—I went down to the police station to get an Aboriginal Licence, without which no person can employ an aborigine.

After my brush with the law the previous night, I was not too sure about my reception; but the Sergeant welcomed me into his office, which was full of swords and rifles of a bygone age.

I explained my business, and as he wrote out the licence he talked on all subjects from horses to goats, and ended up by asking if I knew of a good drench for the "Walkabout" disease in horses.

We became quite friendly, and as I went away he threw me a bunch of keys, pointing to a long building about a hundred yards away and remarking, "Have a look at our library in the Court-house; not a bad one."

With my Aboriginal Licence neatly folded in my pocket, and with visions of being a boss, I walked over to the building the Sergeant had pointed out.

Old Scrutt had already told me about the library, and was anxious that I should read a book called *The Red Badge of Courage*, proclaiming that "By the forked beard of an ancient Saxon god called Hengist, it is something to read and think about."

A notice on the library door informed all who entered that this place was started by a Carnegie grant to one Corporal Power of the Police in the last century, and after reading this information I began to look over the books.

No pen of mine could describe my emotions as I looked over the shelves. I pulled a book out at random—a first edition of Sue's *Mysteries of Paris*—and as I opened it it fell to pieces in my hand.

Row upon row, those old books stood on the shelves. Greek and Latin classics, and every subject from Geology to Medical Science. I looked up the index book on the table in the middle of the room. Opening its white-ant-eaten covers, I saw all the written entries, and the first must surely have been those of the original founder. We hear a lot today of people who began great things to help the people of the outback, but among them no one ever hears the name of Corporal Power, who knew that good reading was essential to the bush people for a perfect understanding of the things around them.

But the will to begin things is different from the will that keeps them going. Borroloola library had its glory before my coming and now it was beginning to decay, and afterwards, as I travelled around the bush, I saw the signs of its destruction. I found its tomes in blacks' camps, where the natives had used them to look at the pretty pictures. A splendid edition of Shakespeare had been used to light some camp-fire, and my first introduction to Plutarch was in the lavatory of the local pub. In that place of restful reading I read of the laws of Solon—read until I heard shuffling footsteps without. Hastily I hid the book for future reading, and smiled to myself as I thought of the new patron cursing and swearing when he discovered he had, as the blacks say, "nothing longa finger".

From the library I returned to the hotel, and as it was nearly tucker-time we decided to have a meal.

Tom the publican was lying shirtless on the veranda outside the bar, and after our greeting he tapped the floor beside him as an invitation to sit down, and as we did so he spoke. "Damn hot . . . not much tucker in town . . . blasted Government . . . no boat . . . stopping for dinner? . . . not much to eat."



On hot days the native women love the cool rockholes of their land  
(See Chapter XXX)





Aborigines have proved themselves outstanding in various sporting fields. This basketball team from the Bagot Aborigines Settlement, four miles outside Darwin, has done well in competition matches.



Young Aborigines file into the schoolroom to the beat of a kettledrum.  
(See Chapter XXXV)

When we told him we were stopping for dinner he raised his voice and called out, "Bunny—Duck-foot!"

A voice came from somewhere round the back of the building, then a patter of feet as two smiling black heads poked through one of the windows and a voice exclaimed, "Wha-name?"

Tom pointed towards us and answered, "These blokes going to have tucker with us . . . cook up a little more." The heads bobbed in again, and Tom continued, "Better go round the back—cooler there."

We accepted the invitation and went with Tom to a large veranda surrounded by shady trees, and as I sat down the woman called "Duck-foot"—given that name by her mother because her foot was splayed out like a duck—came over and asked us for "a little bit tobacco". As she received some from Jack she turned to me with the question, "Where you come from?"

When I told her that I came from Queensland she spoke excitedly to Bunny, the cook, who explained that "Duck-foot benjemin (husband) come from Queensland too", an inference that as we both came from the same place we must be a sort of tribal brothers.

This knotty problem in native kinship remained unanswered, for the dinner-gong rang and we all trooped into the dining-room, to be met by Tom, Scrutt and Chff. Nugget, Jack and I made up the party.

Tom sat at the head of the table, and before him was a big dish with a various assortment of white and blackfellow tucker. The beef was a large slab of dugong, with the addition of a roll of spiced corned beef which had been brought in by the cattle-man Sly. The vegetables were sweet-bucks and pumpkin from old Ki-an's garden. The bread was a mixture made up of part flour and part potatoes, and the only spread to put on it was some wild-bee honey brought in from the bush by a tribesman. This home-made bread was rationed to one slice per person, and because of this the talk swung round to the non-arrival of the Darwin boat *John Forrest*.

"Should be here any day," mumbled Old Scrutt as he helped himself to some more beef. "Thank God we've got the blacks to hunt for us . . . ain't here soon we'll all be on

lily-roots and burnt-honey tea." He changed the subject as he cut some dugong. "This 'gong is real tasty . . . how yer cook it, Bunny—in the ground oven?"

"Always the same with this new crowd in Darwin," interrupted Tom, as he warmed up to his pet phobia. "Damn bunch of silver-tails, that's all they are. In the old days . . ." And off he rambled into the past when the country, according to him, was "land worth living in".

We heard him out, then Old Scrutt changed the subject by talking of the early days when he was with the Jardine expedition into Cape York Peninsula, saying that they didn't worry about boats then but lived off the land as they went along. Cliff the storekeeper kept on eating; listening to anything of interest, and yawning with boredom at the things he had heard before.

So did the meal go on, with talk that ranged from Government heads to blackfellow tucker. The heat was oppressive, and I thought of the shady chestnut tree at our camp and the cool waters of the river. Tom went on talking, and was just launching off into another tirade against "the damn Government" when Bunny and Duck-foot, with a host of other aborigines and their dogs, raced through the dining-room, yelling lustily as they ran, "Boat come . . . boat come up . . . boat come up."

The cry acted as an elixir to the old fellows: chairs were pushed aside as they moved hastily on to the veranda, to see everybody converging towards the river bank at a spot about half a mile away. I heard the clatter of galloping hooves as Sly passed by, yelling "Boat—the boat." Excitement was in the air, so we, too, leapt on to our horses and followed the crowds to the river bank.

What a scene! A number of natives had already massed upon the bank at the "landing", which was a bank of green grass beside a large gum-tree, and coming up the green stretch of water was a motor vessel of about sixty tons. She was nosing her way steadily along the reaches of the stream, and following her along the bank were the "Salt-water" aborigines heralding her in with the roaring cry of "Boat come up—boat come up".

I heard some loud cursing from over the river, and turned to

watch the "Admiral" leaping into his canoe to be on hand to tie her up to the bank, and to get his gang of native stevedores ready for the unloading of supplies that were then to be put on to the heads of native women and men and carted up the bank.

That was a day of gathering clans, and it was also a day of great rejoicing.

## THE 'LOO AND ITS PEOPLE

THOSE OLD-TIMERS AT the 'Loo were ruled by those natives more than they would admit. Outwardly they scoffed at the "blacks" and had strange theories about their blood being akin to the dog, but their very actions and sympathies betrayed them. Stern of visage and brusque with them when strangers were about, you soon realized when you became "one of the mob" that this was just an outward show to impress others. A law of compensation was in operation. Whereas these old white men had, in the beginning, exploited the natives, now the black people were returning to the attack to get their own back on the "white fellow man".

And now, thirty years later, Mangbirr and I were driving amid the relics of the past. The old hotel had aged a lot, and the store of the Vestal Virgins had gone. The old police station was still in action, but its galvanized iron cells, with their concrete floors and iron ring in the centre on to which the prisoners were chained in the good old days, were cluttered up with books from the old library, yellow in their decay. Of the library building nothing could be seen.

Travelling on, we came to a clump of mango trees and in an old tin hut beneath their shade was the "Lawyer", who greeted me as he leaned upon an old walking-stick with a dugong tusk for the hand-grip.

I camped with the "Lawyer", and as I saw him amid the decay I thought of that time when he and the policeman had ordered me away from the natives' camp. But time had mellowed my views, and I could feel with him who had his roots deep in the past with the "old folk".

I went up to the local policeman, who told me about the native drift to the Tableland, and it was the same old story of youths who are eager to be away from the rule of the old people and to search for new fields.

The way out was easy, for the drovers, looking for stockmen, tempted them with good wages, and the mailman from the 'Loo was only too willing to get the fare for their passage to the Tableland.

I sent a "footwalk" native with a letter to my old mate Andy Anderson at Manangoora on the Wearyan River, and he rode in over fifty miles to see me, and together we talked of old times; of the salt pans at his place, and the tall cycads that grew along the bank of the river. He told me that the lily lagoons of Marmarina resounded no more to the shouting of native hunters as they searched for the lily-tubers in its waters; the hunting grounds were deserted and the natives were scattered over the land.

Some old native people were still about the 'Loo, and as I heard their didgeredu playing I remembered the silence that would come over Old Scrutt and his cronies as they listened to its full-throated roar, and I thought of the cattle-man Sly's words: "The o.d blokes at this damn town are only happy when they hear the Jackies corroborree-ing on the banks of the river."

An odd town was the 'Loo. Its existence came about when the sea-going ships dumped their cargoes on the bank of the Macarthur River, to send supplies to the drovers who came with the first mobs of cattle into the Northern Territory. From this part of the river port the horse-teams carted supplies to surrounding settlers, but the railways coming from the coastal ports of Queensland and Darwin gave better facilities, then finally came the motor with quick deliveries, so the decay set in. Its local industry was limited to cattle, and this was retarded by a "walkabout" disease that affected the horses used for mustering the herd.

On top of this was the fact that the aboriginal stockmen received no money as wages and the spending capacity of the community was limited to the travellers who came out of the dry areas to have a good time at this restful spot, and this was insufficient to keep the place alive.

But the passing years have not changed my opinion of the 'Loo. For years my mate Horace and I used this place as a home port after our trips into Arnhem Land, and of the pictures that come to me now I can still remember clearly two strange

cults. One was the deflowering of a young Kurawa girl, and the other was totemic ritual fighting by the lagoon of Min-gara.

### *The Deflowering of Padjemalalya*

The aboriginal tribe of this area are called Anula, a word that means "mainland", distinguishing it from the "Wadadde" (island) people who have the same language but live on the sea shores of the Sir Edward Pellew group of islands at the river's mouth.

In many respects their customs are similar to the Waddaman tribe, and the custom of deflowering arises, with these tribes, out of a belief that the union of male and female does not produce children. The spirit children are born into the world in a dream, and the spirit-child can only be born of a woman who has had the womb-path opened by being deflowered.

### *The Legend*

The legend about this custom is that "Budjemala"—the rainbow serpent of the Kunapipi rituals—is said to enter a girl when she reaches puberty and, by spearing a bag of blood near her heart, causes her to have her periods and children.

But before the serpent can enter she must pass through an operation called "Djalalamunya", a word that means "making the road", and after this she alters her age-group name and is called "Wurumburra".

But should this girl reach puberty before being deflowered, the natives revert to the apparently older custom of knocking out her two front teeth so that she can arrive at the same age-group.

This "tooth-knocking" is always done by her mother's brother. He tells her to close her eyes, then when she does this he distends her big toe, and the next one to it, with a small stick. Now with a chisel-like piece of wood he presses back the gums from the teeth to be removed, and when this is done he puts the wood chisel on to the teeth, and with a sharp blow knocks them out.

With a quick jerk he pulls the girl into a sitting position,

and as he does this he slips the removed teeth between the girl's toes, remarking, as she spits out the blood into this place, "She will be lucky and have no trouble at childbirth."

This tooth-knocking and deflowering is a part of their esoteric belief, for their myths record that those who have never passed through this ritual will eat filth only when they wait to be re-born in the resting-place of the dead.

### *The Ritual*

The girl Padjemalalya was about thirteen years old, and because her parents were proud of the fact that she was about to be made a "Wurumburra" I was invited to the event, and the idea that I was about to see something private would have been laughed at, for in a land where nakedness was the general rule a dressed person was something of a monstrosity.

The girl—unconscious of the event—was sleeping with her parents beside their camp-fire when she was rudely awakened by the shouts of a group of painted men who swept upon the camp from the outer darkness.

Her parents pretended to fight off the attackers, but in reality they were only holding the girl until she was captured, and when this happened they fled off into the night, calling to others of their clan to come and assist them.

The captured girl was now laid on a piece of paper-bark and, as some held her down, her mother's brother deflowered her with a small stone knife laid along his index finger. The only light used was a small paper-bark torch, and as this was extinguished after the cutting her parents returned to the attack and drove off the intruders.

Next morning they painted Padjemalalya with red ochre, and I noticed she was happy when they called her by the name of "Wurumburra". The parents kept her beside their camp for three days, then they made her "clear" by making her stand over a very smoky fire, which they explained to me would "drive away the smell of blood and thus she will receive no sickness".

Many were the presents the newly-deflowered girl received from those who came to visit her in the camp of her parents. These gifts were actually given to her mother's brother, who held them till he had taken back to Padjemalalya's tribal con-



ception ground at Manangoora the piece of paper-bark she had been deflowered on. When he returned he handed the gifts to her with the remark that she was now a young woman. All this time the "Wurumburra" was under a taboo that forbade her to speak, but a few days later the one who had deflowered her took her into the bush, with the remark that "We get wood". Out there he bit the palm of her hand, or her index finger, and as she cried aloud with the pain the taboo was lifted and she returned to the camp of her tribal husband.

### *Totemic Fighting*

The lagoon of Mingara stands out a little from where the Macarthur River forks at the Carrington Channel which is the beginning of its delta, and on the plain not far from the river the tribes had gathered for a ritual fighting over the killing of a man of the "Alundrapurra" (red-breasted rail) totem by another of the "Gardarga" (native companion) totem.

Over two hundred natives had gathered, some to enjoy the holiday, others to settle long-standing grievances.

It was a place well suited for the occasion, and the men of the "Alundrapurra", who had painted themselves with the design of their totem, were crying aloud after the fashion of the bird they represented, and this challenge was answered by the "Gardarga" men, who cried and skimmed over the plain as a native companion does when mating.

After an unusually prolonged calling by the "Alundrapurra" people they came out of their hiding-place at a sharp run, pausing at about forty yards, and, gathering into a tight knot, just as the rails do when hunting, they sent out their totem call as a form of challenge to the others.

One "Piero", the dead man's mother's brother, and therefore the head-man of this ritual, was the one who ran in the lead, and it was he who gave the signal to stop and give the totem call. And as they came to the attack the men of the "Gardarga" pranced around, with outstretched arms, and called in reply.

When about thirty yards apart, six men of the "Gardarga" totem came out to face their accusers. Each man had a large fighting stick in his hands and, somewhat as in the ritual greetings of Arnhem Land, they bent into a crouching position, and

with their fighting sticks lying as a shield before them awaited their accusers.

At a signal, a man came running out from the "Alundra-purra" crowd. With a swift movement he drew a boomerang from his hair-belt and threw it at one of the crouching men, who deflected it with a tilt of his arm, and as he did so another man leapt out from the accusing crowd and sent in his weapon of attack.

Now came a slight pause as the attacked ones ran from side to side to clear the ground of any evil spirits that could cause them harm, and the plain was full of noise from the calling totems.

Then someone was hit, and after that it was a "free-for-all". But I noticed that when men became angry two others—always the father-in-laws, who were tribal protectors—would move in between the fighters, and with much talking and pushing would soon have them apart. I also noticed that when one of the combatants was wounded and the blood flowed he would promptly lower his "guard" and sit on the ground, as a sign that he was out of the fight.

But out of this ritual fighting would come a peaceful understanding. Tribal debts would be settled and those who had blood drawn would be paid in kind by the opposite kin. It was a way of settling grievances in the tribe, and after all was "clear" the people would return to their camp. I was ever surprised to see people who were hurling abuse at each other one day, laughing and singing around each other's camp-fires the next.

And hearing them, as I sat beside my camp-fire, I would wonder just how close to the totems were those fighting men that day. At times they seemed to be the birds they impersonated as they fought.

Their legends record that men were transformed into animals and birds in the dreamtime. How firm is their belief in this myth was brought home to me when I saw an old black man of the Anula tribe pass away. The dying man was of the "Gardarga" totem, and as he was breathing his last I heard the cry of native companions in the distance. Ladjumpa heard it too, and a smile passed over his face, for he knew his totems were ready to receive him.

Being sceptical, I thought some natives had gone into the bush to make this cry as a gesture of goodwill to the dying man, but I was assured that it was the "Gardargas" calling the old man from the distance; they were calling "to make him happy".

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE BARKLY

LEAVING BORROLOOLA WITH heavy hearts, we journeyed back to the Barkly Tableland and arrived at Brunette Downs, a large cattle property which was taken up in the early days, a time when markets were distant and the drovers who took in the "stores" were known in song and story over the land. And just as many bushmen were synonymous with the country they lived in, so did the names of the drovers denote the brand of the cattle and their destination.

Drover Sible meant the "Brunette 505 were off to Musclebrook", and many times at night have I heard the old cattlemen singing around the herd a song about "The 505 is the Brunette brand, and the Brunette brand is 505", a song that somehow put me in mind of the aboriginal chants, where they repeat them over and over so as to refresh the memories of a people who are illiterate.

Brunette is a reminder of the old days with the open-range system of grazing. It has fenced in a lot of country now, but in the past one could go for a thousand miles in the Territory without opening a gate, and pretty near as far without seeing a white woman.

At Brunette I met one of my friends of the *Islanthe* days. I was resting on my swag under a gidgee tree when two native women approached my camp. One was Ida, the other was her daughter Kathleen whose husband was away on a droving trip. "Long time," was her comment, when I asked her how long he had been gone.

We talked of old days, and they laughed as they chatted, for they seemed happy in the thoughts of those past times. This is a remarkable thing I have discovered with native people; they have that rare ability to be happy in adversity. Rarely reasoning or even thinking of the conditions of life about them, they never get into that state of mental depression which causes people to commit suicide, and all the sentimental talk and



We know each 'girl's' name by her track on the sand,  
The Belles of the rivers, the 'Girls from inland',  
The Maids of the mountains, and lor' I forgot  
The Sirens from sea-shores, the best of the lot.

They are comely and dark, and the glint of their eyes  
Are as dew-drops that gleam on a wintry sun-rise.  
And the firm rounded breasts that seductively tease  
Are like seed-pods that sway from squat baobab trees.

So hail Borrooloola, the Ord, V.R.D.  
The 'Nash' and the 'Hill' for a cracker old spree.  
We are riding with cheques and we sing as we come  
For a gut-full of wooing, a gut-full of rum.

Let gin-shepherds watch when the rain clouds appear,  
And the ring of horse-bells tell his 'girls' when we're near.  
He will lock up his 'Studs' but we'll steal them away  
To our paper-bark fires till breaking of day.

For green is the grass where the early rains fall,  
Our pack-bags are full, so we'll answer the call  
To ride down bush tracks and old friendships renew  
To the beat of a tap-stick and didgeredu,  
To the beat of a tap-stick and didgeredu."

I smiled as I heard the song, for it reminded me of the old days at the 'Loo. Each country is full of these men who laughed at society yet became the ancestors of people who are proud that their stem goes back into the original tribes.

Next morning we were up with the piccaninni dawn, and travelling into the sunrise over this treeless land I could not help thinking of how this Northern Territory had been plotted by ritual and chant in the dreamtime lore. Every stone above the ground became the origin of a myth, each spring a sacred taboo, and few of the things of nature were unknown to the natives when it affected their well-being. Native wells and rock-holes were the repositories of their sacred cults, and every hidden supply of water they had discovered. Crab-holes in dried-up water-courses were dug up to provide a drink for the

thirsty hunter, and water was tapped from trees by simply removing a piece of bark, and the presence of water in the tree's hollow would be observed by the gurgling sound coming from within when a stone was rapped against the tree trunk.

Animals and their movements were known, and legends taught the youth of the tribe how to hunt them with the least effort.

So we came to the Playford River, and at a water-hole called the "Six-mile" I encountered a most remarkable aborigine. He was wrinkled and very old, but nevertheless very much alive. His name was "Watgurra", and the aborigine with him told me he was the last of the "Rain-makers".

His hair was done up in a bun and tied with human hair string, and over this, as a sort of hair-cream, was a thick layer of red ochre mixed with fat. This hair-do was always used by the hunters to prevent their hair from waving in the wind as they stalked their prey, and the "bun" contained a small cavity in which he carried the instruments of his rain-making craft.

Old Watgurra was quite open regarding his art, and showed me his sacred "Rain-stones", which were small pieces of calcite that had been handed to his tribe from an "elder sunset way". Why the "Rain-art" came from the land of little rain, and not from the north with a good rainfall, could only be explained by the fact that necessity gives rise to an idea, and only in dry areas could the rain-making cult arise.

I questioned Watgurra as to how he made the rain and where the rain came from and, omitting his difficult talk—impossible to put on paper—he explained it all like this:

"The world is in three layers. The spirits who live beneath the ground are those who cause it to shake when they are angry. The mortals of the land surface are the present tribes, and overhead are the ever-watchful spirits of the skies, and the one whom Watgurra communed with was the spirit of the rain.

"The Rain-spirit walked about on the clouds which were formed by earth-frogs throwing water into the air when nearing their mating time, and as the clouds formed the earthly 'Rain-makers' sang their ritual chants as they put the 'Rain-stones', together with the entrails of a 'goanna', into a drying water-hole."

He further informed me the entrails of the "goanna" were to make the Rain-spirit "good biny for tucker", and the calcite crystal 'Rain-stones' would make the water turn to milk if the Rain-spirit heard the rain-chants.

"The rain came from a large wooden water-carrier that was carried in the crook of the Rain-spirit's arm, in the same manner as an earthly hunter carries his. Thus would he walk from cloud to cloud listening to the chants of his earthly 'Rain-men', and hearing one with the sweetest and loudest chant, he would lean over to listen, and as he did the water would spill from his carrier on to the earth as rain."

And as he chanted his "Rain-songs" I noticed Mangburr listening intently, and that night he was down beside their fires telling them about his land and the big salt waters that stretched away "like plain country this way"

Well into the night they sang and talked, while I lay and tried to understand what it was all about, but I am afraid I was just a "white fellow man" and as such could not possibly understand "blackfellow business", and this was confirmed on the morrow when I asked Mangburr what it was all about. The only explanation I could get from him was that it was just "blackfellow talk about nothing".

As we made ready to break camp I saw a large flock of budgerigars come whirling in from the westward, and as they came in to drink I watched Watgurra and his pal, trilling like the kestrel-hawk, hurl a boomerang into their midst. This bird call, the cry of the Enemy as he swoops to kill, made the birds bunch together in the air, and as they did so the speeding boomerangs were among them. Driving away, we saw them gather up the results of the kill, and I thought of how the aborigine had worked out all these tricks of the hunt in his efforts to survive; worked them out, only to be confronted by a far greater problem with the coming of the white man.



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### LENNIES

OUR NEXT STOP was at Alexandria cattle-station, a property covering ten thousand square miles, and run by thirty-four whites, thirty-one aboriginal stockmen and fifty-three of their dependants—one person for every ninety square miles of the best grazing land on the Barkly Tableland.

Some horses galloping in the distance as we came in made me think of Paddy Lenny, and his strange life in this area.

The word "Lenny" was synonymous with wild horses on the Barkly Tableland years ago, and many a drover and horseman was thankful to Paddy when he trapped one of the wild horses.

Originally Paddy Lenny came from Ireland, and he followed his trade as a blade-shearer to shear the sheep on Avon Downs. Paddy was a horse breeder, and a horse lover, in fact he was a confirmed "horse crank". To him horses were things with souls. He bred them, not for sale but for the love of them.

The Lawn Creek water-hole, west of Avon Downs, was the spot where he pitched his camp during the "lay-up" time, and once, when he came in and discovered that the big water-hole was nearly dry, he rode into Alexandria homestead to report it, and because of his long ride—a distance of nearly seventy miles—the station cattle-men were able to arrive in time to save the herd from a big "smash".

As Paddy had helped them, so did the station-owners decide to give Paddy the right to run and breed his horses on the land—a bad move for Paddy, and a deed that became a curse to the station, for his horses multiplied as the stallions chased and scattered the stock-plants that were hobbled. And ever amid his mob—like a nomadic Centaur—was Paddy Lenny trailing his unbranded herd.

His home was his tattered hat during the "dry", and in the "wet" a piece of old calico, a bag or a green-hide tossed over a bush by a drover as he killed a beast. His store-houses were

hollow trees or bags made waterproof by dipping them in boiling grease and afterwards hanging them on the limbs of shady trees. His riding saddle was an old model in a sad state of disrepair, while his pack-saddle was a strange contraption made from a broad band of sacking tied round his pack-horse as a surcingle. On to this, in a glorious array of many colours, were little knobs of cloth containing sugar, tea or flour, carefully tied on to the "pack-saddle" with bits of tie-wire.

This state of affairs could not continue, so the cattle-station people applied to the Government that his horses should be declared "vermin" and as such could be destroyed. This the Government did, and soon an open war was declared on Paddy and his "Lennies".

Many were trapped and driven to the Ranken Police Station to be sold by the policeman in charge of the area, and when Paddy saw his loved ones being sold for a few shillings he tried to open the gates of the sale-yard and let them free. This was a breach of the law, and when the police intervened a scuffle ensued, and as a result Paddy was arrested and sent to the Borroloola jail on a six-months' charge.

But the Sergeant at Borroloola treated the old fellow well. It was more of a rest home, and a place to keep him out of the way, while they cleaned up his herd of horses, but when he was released he was away like a crow back to his beat. He walked the hundred miles to the Top Springs, and there he came upon the track of a pack camel and learned from the aborigines camped there that it had been left behind by the Brunette camel team, which carted goods from Borroloola at that time.

This was good news to Paddy. He quickly made a riding saddle from some bag and grass, and with a nose-line made from bush rope he mounted the ungainly creature and headed back the two hundred and fifty miles towards his home on Lawn Creek.

They told me the story of how the policeman stationed at Anthony's Lagoon called to him as he rode by, "Where yer going, Paddy?" and laughed at his reply of, "Kiss me back-side", as he kept going.

The ride was nothing to Paddy, who could live as he rode. But his homecoming was one of sorrow, as his loved ones were

scattered over the land and, brooding over his supposed wrongs at the hands of the cattle-men, he finally decided to go to Darwin and place his case before the authorities.

He arrived in Darwin in 1923, but he got no redress from the people who had issued the order for his herd's destruction, and he sadly retraced his steps to his hollow log stores and his green-hide shelters over nine hundred miles away.

A bushman called Len Adams met Paddy, and they travelled together. A fever was raging at the time and Len, leaving Paddy, rode off to Maryfield cattle-station to get some quinine for their relief. He was away six days, and when he returned he found old bare-footed Paddy Lenny had passed away.

Len himself was weak at the time, and the ground around the Giles water-hole was hard, so he covered the body with earth and stones and rode away to report the tragedy.

Months later Frank Bishop, the stock inspector, and Sol Green rode that way, but nothing remained of the dead one. So, as a form of respect, they placed a ring of stones round the spot where he died, and in the centre they laid out more stones to spell the name "LENNY".

The end of the Barkly patrol was at Lake Nash cattle-station, where I stayed a few nights with an old cobbler of mine, Jack Mahoney of the N T. Police Force. Talking to the "Aluwarra" (greasy-people) of that area, I thought of that time in 1912 when I first came in contact with the ancestors of these people.

The "Lake"—as it was affectionately called by the cattle-men who had been "laid-up" and now camped on its waters—was a great camping site, and it was at that camp that I saw the old desert aborigines coming in from the west with their kangaroo-hide "Wanjis" (water carriers) over their shoulders. Those "Wanjis" were a credit to those people. Made from the freshly killed kangaroo, the meat was first scooped out, and after it was cleaned thoroughly it was well tanned by an admixture of blood-wood gum and water, which was left in and shaken from time to time till the tan showed through, and then it was ready for use.

And now, forty years later, I was talking to a different people from those who deflowered their girls with a stone phallus

amid primitive surroundings, and traded their women to the "traveller man".

The "traveller man" What memories that word brings to me after forty years of travel in the Northern Territory, of us cattle-men, "hobbled out" a bush term for a general lay-up after the mustering had finished—on the creek; of the yarns and sing-songs under the trees of knowledge; of the rivalry of the "gin-burglars" out to steal some of the "flock" away from the "gin-shepherds".

"Through gidgea and lancewood they ride  
In search of a 'spinifex-bride',  
Where the oldest profession is phed.  
Pale 'shepherds of fairies', take care."

And looking over the lignum-lined lake of the "Nash" I remembered that memorable Christmas Eve, when the heat was sizzling down on the gibber plain. An early storm, opening a road in from the western desert, had brought some of the Aluwarra clans along that trade path of other days. They were "fresh to the river", and among them was an old elder whose locks had been coiffeured in bush style with spinifex wax and red ochre. Over his shoulder was his kangaroo-skin water-carrier, and beside him was a bevy of "spinifex fairies". Because of these "Christmas gifts" he was acclaimed "Father Christmas", and that name clung to him over the years.

Measured against the Native Affairs taboos today those times seem pretty crude, but in those days that thing was as much accepted as were the feudal Baron's rights over his serf's daughter in days gone by. The aborigines wished to make their friends happy, and everything was right according to the tribal law.

Those days of the past, when the young lubras of the tribe were regarded as amenities to hold the single white men to their jobs, have passed away. It was an era exemplified by the story of the white pumper on a lonely well, who wrote a note to the cattle-station manager demanding that he sent out "a new pumper or a young gin". The manager's reply by next station truck was not in writing, but was in the practical form of two young native girls to keep him contented on the job.

Jack and I talked long about the changing days, and filled with memories of the past I bade him "Good-bye" and headed back the hundreds of miles to the office—and the endless reports that somehow always became lost in the dusty files of the office.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### OUT WEST

I HAD JUST COME down the Bratling jump-up, leaving the heavy lancewood and bullwaddie scrub of the "Murrarji" stock route behind, when I saw a mob of bullocks feeding over the grassy foothill close beside the road.

A drover's help came over to have the usual talk about the stock-route ahead, so I pulled the motor up under a shady mountain-gum for the rider to approach. Imagine my surprise when I discovered "him" to be a girl dressed in the clothes of a cattle man.

Her hat was not of the cowboy type of the motion pictures, but the old broad-brimmed felt hat of the dinkum bushman, and her riding trousers were of the old-time stockman-cut, with a pair of low-heeled elastic-sided boots, concertina leggings and a coloured shirt a little open at the neck for comfort.

Reining her horse beside the car, she leaned over on to the pommel of the riding saddle—as all stockmen do when resting—and, encouraged by her smile, I spoke:

"Good day."

"Good day."

A pause as I felt for surer ground—"Zigginbine, where from?"

"We're from Wave Hill and bound for Morestone," she replied. "Tough going on the stony country . . . cattle are getting tired." She looked back along the road to a small cloud of dust above the timber, then continued, "Dad has a lot of the tail, coaching 'em along."

She paused a little, then asked the usual drover's questions: "What's it like ahead . . . what's the water like . . . how's the mob in the lead?"

I told her that Conway was watering at Number Eleven bore, and Jack Davidson was getting near the Murrarji water-hole.

She listened intently, as her horse pawed the ground, so

I asked her a pertinent question, "How do you like this life?"

She looked surprised at my question, and replied, "It's all right . . . I've been on the road all me life . . . Dad goes with the bullocks, he and the Abo stockmen . . . Mum does the cooking, her and me youngest sister who goes to school by the correspondence system. Then me youngest brother is the horse-trailer." She paused, then went on, "We're short-handed now, my biggest sister got married. You'll see her and her husband with the mob of cattle behind. Her hubby is in charge of them."

She looked over the herd of feeding cattle and, noticing a "string" of them making off to the south after some imaginary water-hole, she gathered up the reins and, with a brief farewell, rode away into the timber beside the foothills.

As I drove away I heard a native with me remark, "Proper different kind this one . . . proper different", a sentence that only goes to show that there can be many different kinds of "different kinds".

From the Jump-up flats we travelled down the Armstrong to the Top Springs, and that night I camped beside a small creek near Moantajenni out-station of the V.R.D. (Victoria River Downs). The sight of this place brought back memories of my old mate Horace Foster, who "rode the cattle tracks" here in the days when the herds wandered into the scrublands of the south, where the Mudbra watched and waited for the opportunity to kill and feast off the cattle which were responsible for driving them from their tribal lands.

At this place I met one of those strange station cooks who belong to the "death-adder" type. He was lying back on a bush-built easy-chair when I called to see him, and although I gave the customary "Hullo" to let him know that someone was about, he just lay perfectly still, with a paper over his face and peering at me through a hole in it.

Seeing that he was "ying doggo" I gave another call, when he snatched the newspaper off his face and abruptly answered, "Hullo what?"

Abashed at this welcome I could only say, "Well, hullo you, I suppose."

"Why suppose?" he countered. "What yer want?"

"Nothing," I replied. "I just came up to see if you were about."

"Well, I am about, ain't I?" was the next reply, as he lay back once more.

Looking beyond him as he spoke, I saw one of the station native women point towards the cook's head and shake her own, as a sign of madness, so I left him to his cooking and his "girls" and returned to my camp.

What makes people fall into this state of mind I cannot say. Solitude perhaps, a loneliness that gives them a liking for their own company and a hatred for the other fellow's.

The bush does strange things to people, and many bushmen talk to themselves as they ride along. "Thinking aloud" they call it, and I must confess that I have found myself talking aloud at times to some imaginary opponent; in fact, these are the only debates in which I score a victory.

Psychologists could explain it as something of the sub-conscious mind. The aborigines are always at it, and when questioned explain that they "been talk-talk nothing", which is about the only logical answer to give.

In the bush they say that "thinking aloud" is all right, but when one starts to talk to the swag or billycan then the trouble begins.

Next morning we journeyed on towards Wave Hill, and as we drove the ninety miles I thought about some of the place-names on that road: "Garibaldi", "Kuranyak", "Lonely Spring". The names of great men, of tribal legends or strange incidents—which? Their origin is forgotten, and I wonder who was the first to drive a wagon along this trail. We read all about Hume, who drove a dray over virgin land from Melbourne to Sydney, but who remembers the one who opened the "pot-jostler" road from Townsville west, or battled over the sand-hills in the dry lands?

On this road, which is also a stock route from the west, we passed the windmills and tanks that stretch along the way to water the herds as they travel, and on the big black iron sheets of the squatters' tanks one could read the "Bagman's Gazette", which is the escape channel for the grievances of the travellers as they go by.

All manner of poems and tales are written on these with a



white clay, and pictures by crude artists portrayed many a warning against, or praise for, the hospitality of the station cooks and their bosses.

One chap who signed himself "Desert-rat" tells all to "Shie clear of station . . . the cook's a gin-burglar"

Another says that "Drover starves his 'Jackies' and pays everybody with a stiff cheque".

Another tells all "Beware, for bulls and bosses mate, beyond the next big boundary gate".

A verse on one of the big tanks was a parody on "Home, home on the range", which was in great demand as a song at "night watch" when the drovers rode around the herd:

"Oftimes at night, when the stars shining bright  
I can hear the old didgeredu.  
And my foot-steps will stray, for I can't keep away  
From the 'Girls' that are easy to woo.

*Chorus.*

Home, home on the range,  
Where the gins as young heifers will play,  
And a 'Ringer's' supplied with a 'Girl' for a bride,  
And wages at ten bob a day."

Each tank we passed had its "news", and only when a boss passed by and saw his name in a headline would he get the tank re-tarred, and the "slate" would then be clean for another issue of the local "News".

We passed by many mobs of cattle going "inside", where they would be fattened at the depots ready for next season's kill. The country was stony in places between Moantajenni and Wave Hill, and in passing the mobs of cattle we had to be careful about our passage through. On the grass flats, where the herds would be spread out, it was easy to get by, but in the hills that were overlaid with basalt boulders it was difficult to pass the mob which was being "strung out" along the roadway. Boulders were everywhere upon the road, and to make it easier for the cattle—or motor-trucks, I don't know which—a gang of station natives kept the roadway in repair by tossing

them off as fast as they were knocked back again by the passing cattle.

The basalt hills gradually changed to undulating downs covered with Mitchell and Flinders grass, and, standing in a mirage made of the sun's rays, was the Wave Hill main homestead.

Legend records that when the old homestead on the bank of the Victoria River was partly washed away by the 1915 flood, the then Pastoral Manager overheard the Wave Hill Manager remark that he wouldn't like a homestead on the plains and, being cantankerous, he built the homestead on the place where it stands today. The natives at that time objected, but they soon came into line, and when I saw their camp upon that windy, treeless plain, I could not believe it—exiled to that spot, with a fine stretch of water only a few miles away.

Water, to the aborigines of the dry lands, is something to guard and revere. The word "water" has become synonymous—for both black and white men—with "camp". How many white people in towns turn on a tap without giving a thought to the source of supply and the laws that govern its control? To them it is a natural thing, and only when it ceases to flow do they get the same feeling about it as the aboriginal people of the dry lands do when they see their waters drying away. Out of that discomfiture, which disrupted the tribes in the past, arose the tribal laws that govern its supply.

On the Muranji track, many years ago, the Mudbra aborigines with their families lived beside each main water and levied tribute from the aboriginal stockmen and drovers who passed that way.

The custom of "making them clear" was performed by an old elder of the Mudbra, who poured some of the taboo water over the initiate's head, as he rapped it hard to let the rainbow serpent within the pool know that all was well. For should this ritual not be performed the breaker of the taboo would surely sicken and die as a result.

The idea behind this taboo was not so much one of superstition as common logic. These were the main waters of the tribe, and experience had shown the old people that the semi-permanent waters must be hunted over first and the food supply of these areas left as a reserve. This water taboo was only "on"

while the outlying waters held, and should they dry then the taboo was lifted and everybody was free to come in.

I first heard about this taboo-lifting when we were coming from the O.T. cattle station on to the head-waters of the Newcastle Creek during a dry time. Knowing the waters ahead were taboo, we had filled our water canteens for the use of our native stockmen and their women, but on arriving at the water place an old aborigine pointed to a rocky ledge on its bank and informed us that "Above that ledge is the poison of the rainbow, but below it everything is 'clear' ". Apparently they had never reached that degree of civilization where price is governed by "supply and demand".

Leaving the cattle-station on the windy plain, I went down to the river seven miles away and camped that night with some Afghan friends of mine who owned the local store. Who, among the bushmen, has not heard of Adraman Khan and his mate Melang, old camel-men from the mountains near Kabul? They are dead now, and the store pulled down, but it was ever a pleasure to walk into their store, sit down at their table and, over a drink of tea, hear them talk about the past when they were camel-men working for Abdul Wade, the great camel-owner of bygone days. Old Adraman was getting up in years and, as he suffered with some sort of cramp, was always talking of going back to his country and rejuvenating himself at a famous muddy stream said to have healing properties.

These two were full of information about events from the past, and many were the old-time remedies that Melang had picked up when he was a soldier in the British Army at Hong Kong. He showed me his discharge, an "honourable" one of fifty years ago, and I was filled with admiration for this great old man, who was said to have been a great worker in his day.

## CHAPTER XXX

### OUT CATFISH WAY

ABOUT THIS TIME the Native Affairs decided to bring into the Branch some vigorous young men from the south, so Fred Gubbins of Adelaide came over to join in a patrol of an area to the westward.

The country was called the Catfish Area, after a large water-hole on the Victoria River, and the purpose of the patrol was to get exact information about the water and grasslands of this future Aboriginal Reserve.

Ever since the white cattle-men had come into this country the aborigines had been hard-pressed to survive. Bound as they were by fixed rules regarding tribal boundaries, and the warnings of the cattle-men that they must not disturb the cattle on their hunting areas, they were forced to live around the station homesteads to become the stockmen and domestics for these people.

The original tribes of this area were the Mudbra, but as they weakened through contact the Nginin (outside) people to the west took over, and these in turn were displaced by another migrant wave from the desert areas, called the Warramulla.

To patrol this area it was necessary to obtain horses from the local constable in charge of the Wave Hill Police Station so, under authority from the head office, we took over a plant of horses, packs and riding saddles, together with two native stockmen who knew this country. After two days' riding we arrived at "Mundaluk"—the Catfish water-hole.

Our aboriginal guides were Smiler, and another who had been given the name of a former constable Bill McCann. They were good horsemen and crammed with native mythology relating to this area. Camping beside the old stub-yard at the Catfish, they recounted how this place had been a great meeting-place for the tribes in days gone by. Well into the night they chanted their songs of olden times, interrupting the chants

now and then to explain their meaning, and in the morning we saddled up and were off to the westward for a place called Hooker's Creek.

The country we travelled through had been the scene of much volcanic activity cons ago, and the lavas of that age had determined the pastoral country of today. The grey deposits of that geological time have weathered into black soils which are covered with Mitchell and Flinders grass, while the red basalts have become the red soils covered with desert grass, spinifex and timbers of the bloodwood, salmon- and snappy-gum.

After a long ride we finally reached Hooker's Creek, which is really a flat watercourse meandering eastward over grass-covered coolabah flats to form, here and there, small billabongs as its flood waters—during rain times—swirl round a spur of the hard desert ground or scoop out a soft patch on the plain.

Next day as we rode along Smuler kept us amused by pointing out items of interest along our route. He showed us many marked trees in the desert and explained that in olden times the black men used the water stored within them, by nature, to help them during the hunt, and as he talked and pointed I thought about the people who once owned this land.

Ngunns they were called, a vigorous tribe sixty years ago but now just a name and a few flints around some camping site, or a cut on a tree made by their stone axes to get at a possum or a "sugar-bag".

Yet these people were never displaced by anyone taking possession of their land. Their disintegration came about from "drift", and the desire of people to see what pleasures awaited them on the other side of the horizon. They were a semi-desert people, who built and used "Ngoardes" to provide them with water in the dry lands. The "Ngoarde" is an earth tank made by sinking a round deep hole in a good catchment area, such as a clay-pan, and from this small drains are made so that the rain-water can fill up the tank.

I had heard about these native tanks from an old bushman. He was once a scoffer of native ways, but he altered his tune when his canteen was smashed against a tree by his pack-camel, and he was only saved from perishing by accidentally stumbling

over the log covering of a "Ngoarde" as he tried to reach the distant waters ahead.

"By Christ I was glad," he told me. "I watered the camels, patched and filled the canteen, and got through only because a blackfellow's brain had thought about water in a dry country."

Our plant of horses for the trip were a tough breed, and good campers. Each morning would find them within sight of the camp, and as their shod hooves rattled over the stones as they jogged into camp I could only wonder at the number of horse-shoes used in this country by the stock camps of the cattle stations.

A "set" of shoes weighs, on an average, about three pounds, and a set lasts a working horse about eight weeks. When one thinks of the number of horses that go to make a stock-plant, more than one plant on each station, then one begins to think of horseshoes in ten lots and horseshoe nails by the bagful.

Everywhere we travelled in this land we passed from fact to fancy. Some mosquito pegs on a clay-pan attracted our attention and the natives informed us that they were put there by the Wave Hill stockmen who "Been come here look for man where he steal cattle and drive him that-a-way". As the direction one native pointed to with his under-lip was to the west I thought of the tough cattle-men of those dry lands and the organization it needed to carry out such a raid.

We camped for mudday tucker at a billabong called "Mardoyardo" (the place of plenty frogs), and as we boiled the billy Smiler dug some frogs up out of the dry earth where they live. Quite a number were in one hole, and when he tossed them on to the coals of the fire the wretched creatures bounded out, to be knocked back again as a tennis player would do with the ball of his opponent. Useless to remonstrate, for to the aborigines the frogs were "tucker", and as "tucker" we all ate them, and I was surprised at their nice flavour.

To the aborigine, everything he can eat is "tucker". These foods are divided into the "light" and the "heavy" varieties. Into the "light" group comes honey, and all those foods with no staying power, and the "heavy" ones are the meats and solid diets. And just as they gathered food by studying the habits of the creatures they hunted, so did they know the right

method of cooking that food to get the best nutritive value. They knew that under-done meat has the best value as food, but such is the mentality of many white people that to them a native would be eating "raw" meat whereas he would be eating it "rare".

At one place on our travels we had passed by the nearly-obiterated Tanami Road that led from Wave Hill to the gold-field, and just as Bill was giving us a rather harrowing story about some traveller who had died of thirst upon the iron grill overlaying the well of water beside it, Smiler pointed to some red bluffs on our right and told us that they were the "Jumba", "Jungala" and "Warn" Dreamstone places of the Nginun mythology.

'Twas here, he told us, that the tribesmen of the Dreamtime gathered to await the "Old Woman" who was coming from "sunrise way". Long they chanted and waited, till a man of the Budgeraga totem came in with the terrible news that the "Dog-men of Wurangun" (a rain place west of Powell's Creek) had pulled her down in a savage running fight, and her bones were now scattered and transformed into the hills and mounds of that area.

And that night, as we camped near "Wundunga" (water goanna conception place) in Maggie Creek, Smiler told us how the enraged tribesmen marched north-east to wipe out the insult, but were persuaded not to go on by the Mudbra people of the Pelican totem who were camped at "Pularowa", those basalt hills where we had passed by the natives clearing the road as we came into this land.

As a part of that long legend, Smiler chanted a "song-cycle" and, translated, it told how one "Kumbern" of the "Jabariou" totem killed all in his path as he strode along as a Dreamtime Ajax, and as he slew his enemies they arose again as totemic birds; the black crows from the burnt grass on which he slew them, the native-companions from the colour of the grey earth, the pelican who received his colour from the grey and black earth on which he rolled in his death agony, and the budgerigar from the green leaves on to which he fell and died.

Kumbern continued on his march of death until he was slain by "Judung the eagle" who, knowing that he was protected by magic, crept upon him as the killer fought at "Pitjangan" (near

Longreach water-hole) and, under a mantle of invisibility, he stabbed him through the heart so that he was transformed into the Dreamtime stone that still stands beside the Victoria River.

Noting our interest in his chants, Smiler lowered his voice and told us about "Jundargul", the powerful serpent with a greenish-brown body and white-tipped nose. He came, so Smiler informed us, from the salt-water country, and moving over the land he introduced his powerful cult.

The legend told how "Jundargul" came through the country of the Victoria River, then up the Armstrong Creek to the Muranji, where he left some of the hairs of his head, as Bull-waddie trees, at "Murranjilunga" (the ear of Muranji). Then he and his band went across the plains of Anthony's Lagoon to come finally to rest at "Jeringerree" on the Gregory River, over one thousand miles from the original starting-place beside the Timor Sea.

And as Jundargul marched in the past, so arose a great culture trading route over the land, and to its rituals each year the tribal elders came to escort it across their country. There they would also trade and exchange the knowledge they had acquired since the last one, and when they reached their tribal boundary another group of elders carried it on. Thus did each tribe add its quota to the sum of human experience, and by this the tribes were bound together in this council of old men, the dim beginnings of our modern science congress.

Strange, is it not, that on this patrolling of native reserves we have somehow broken away from factual things; for our aboriginal guides have transformed this place of water-holes, stones and trees into a land that is alive with people of legend and song. Hills of stone have been changed into chanting tribesmen, and small creeks are but the trails of Culture Heroes who once marched over this land.

But on this patrol we also saw the grass plains of the plateaux, and riding back on to the Victoria River we had a meal at the large water-hole of "Indidde", where the fresh-water crocodiles basked in the sun over five hundred miles from the sea.

That night, as we camped at Sambo Creek, I asked Smiler how it received its name, and he told us it was called after an aborigine who once lived in this part. The whites had picked him up as a lad, and he afterwards became a great horse- and



cattle-man. "He was well liked by the white men," Smiler informed us, "because he was a good man."

So we returned to the police station and delivered the horses, and Fred and I went over to visit some native people who were camped in the river bed to escape the blast of the cold wintry winds. Some old women were washing their clothes in a pool beneath a paper-bark tree, and beside them was an old native crouching over a smouldering fire. He was blind and feeble, and on inquiring who he was, Smiler told us he was the old Sambo of Sambo Creek fame.

"Great horse- and cattle-man, and well liked by the whites," yet now a wreck among the ruins of the past.

I have heard people remark that the aborigine is "improvident", yet it was Sambo's Nginin tribe who built those earth tanks in the desert lands that saved the white camel-man who would have perished but for their "providence".

But the Catfish trip was not in vain. Against the wishes of many who resist intrusion, a settlement has been built upon the reserve, and to it the desert people can come as they drift on their way to the contact areas. In the school competent white teachers give the native children their lessons, while the Superintendents and their wives tend to the people's needs.

But let us hope that these settlements give more than shelter to the distressed aborigines. The native people belong to the land, and it is to be hoped that they shall ever ride the herds to help the cattle industry of this country.

## BACK TO REPORT

THE RETURN JOURNEY from Wave Hill was through the G.B. rock-hole westward, and a native took me across to see crater-like caves in the ground which he said were "Sun Dreamings". The rock ledges within them were covered with native art, but he could give no information about their origin or their ritual.

I had seen these things before on the Dry River, and the natives with me then explained that the sun was born from these in the Dreamtime, and should anyone throw a lighted fire-brand into them the water-holes of the country would dry up and a severe drought would come over the land.

From the "Sun-place" we travelled on to reach a cattle-station that was originally taken up by two old Territorians, but because of distant markets they sold out to the "big fellow", and at the time of my arrival Jack Beasley was doing a spot of cooking to "keep the tucker bags full".

Those old-timers certainly have the secret of life. Having no fads, they can gallop over the country at an age when others are hobbling about on a stick. Most of their lives they live on corned beef and damper, with now and then some "bush tucker" thrown in to buck up the vitamin content.

This cattle-station homestead overlooks one of the biggest rock-holes I have ever seen. From the ledge on which the homestead is built the drop is about fifty feet to the water's edge, and in all the years the homestead has stood there the native women have scrambled, like mountain goats, up that rocky face with the water supply. Imagine the grumbling from the water-carriers when someone accidentally spilled the precious fluid during the cooking. How eyes must have watched to see that nobody washed their pannikins out as they drank their morning billy of tea. The "labour hours" to carry that water would certainly make it very "dear" in the eyes of the water-carriers, and rather "dear" to the cattle-owners should the carriers be paid wages.

One manager had installed a "flying-fox" from the cliff to the middle of the pool, but the windlass handle had to be turned eighty times for the water to be landed, so the "girls" preferred to do the "mountain goat" act than get "proper short wind" on the "gut-buster" of this mechanical age.

I questioned the manager about this, and he was quite serious as he told me that it "kept the gins from getting too lazy . . . made them lively".

So I left that station of the "lively gins" and our track from there led for seventy miles over a newly-made road. The manager explained that it had just been made, and a fire grader was out on it "smoothing down the ruts".

For seventy miles we bounced and lurched along that road, but although I cursed a lot I could not but admire the man who made it with only an axe, pick and shovel, and a grader constructed of bush logs spiked together and shod with a piece of flattened wagon tyre. His assistant was a black man of this country, who showed him the way through the jumbled hill and helped him stir up the donkeys as they hauled the contraption to "smooth down the ruts".

At long last I reached Waterloo cattle-station, and saw the "grader" and beside it, scratching his head over some knotty repair problem, was the man who blazed the road I had just followed. His native cobber was beside him, but I am sure that his name will grace no creek along the way and the road will be called just "road". No survey pegs or blueprints directed them, and no cut ribbons or flowery speeches opened it up for traffic. Yet it was men like these beside the grader who made nearly all the roads in Australia. They are the unknown trail-blazers who opened up this land.

The manager of the Waterloo cattle-station was a cattle-man from the "Cooper Creek side" in Queensland, and it was his wife who first gave me an inkling of how white women can bring new ideas into the back country.

Pot plants now hang everywhere, floors are clean, linen neatly pressed, order rises out of disorder, and although the native women may complain that "too much work", I am sure many owe their lives to a timely warning given to the "Missus", who tells the "Boss". A message goes out over the wireless—all have one—and out of the "blue" comes the doctor's plane.

The coming of the white woman into this land was an era of alarm for the old-timers who lived the good old bush way. What a grumbling as they took over. "Once a white woman comes on to a cattle-station a man has got to get out," they would grumble, as they tried to find something after a cleaning-up. And I can never forget an old cattle-man at the 'Loo, who was amazed at the way a white woman performed—"She kicked up a hell of a rumpus because I was absentmindedly cutting me toe-nails with a table-knife"

Mrs. Hagan's hobby was plants and flowers; her grievance that bulbs, roots and cuttings were hard to procure. The white women from surrounding stations would help each other by exchanging plants, and by this a common affinity grew up among them. But I am afraid the flower garden idea does not find favour with most bushies, who reckon that one should only grow the things that are edible.

Beyond Waterloo station is the country of the Kilfoyles and the Duracks, old-timers who have shown an interest in the aborigine; an interest that is so well portrayed in the books and paintings of the Durack sisters.

At Newry the manager talked of what should be done to the "big man" in this country, and as he talked I glimpsed a picture of small holdings of about four hundred square miles over the whole of the good pastoral area with, along the river frontages, smaller holdings and farms that could be irrigated by water stored in dams such as that on the Ord River project a little below Argyle cattle-station.

The picture was a grand one, but the big cattle-stations are a power to be contended with before Fuller's dreams can be realized.

This road through Newry is the old trail that led from Queensland to Wyndham in the days of the Hall's Creek gold rush, and on one of the large bottle-trees beside the track was a piece of tin recording that one of that weary band had been buried beside it. Further on I came to the Auvergne station on the bank of the Baines River, and at that place I met and talked with cleanly-dressed native women, with small children beside them, as they stood outside their neat dwellings beside the station homestead.

There I met an old cobbler of mine, Tom Ronan. He was

the head-stockman, and he has since published two great books, his last one, *The Vision Splendid*, a masterpiece depicting life in this strange land.

And now the road leads through the Victoria River country. River flats and red hills covered with coolabah, white gums and the yellow flowering cotton-wood trees among the tall spear grass, and where the road narrows at some stony hills we came out at the Victoria River and the old depot store.

What memories are there in this deserted place, which was called the "Depot" because Gregory the explorer had a depot there; and not far away is "Timber Creek", where he cut some timber to repair his supply ship.

But now the old store is in ruins. No more do the sailing ships carry cargo from Darwin to Blunder Bay, at the river's mouth, where it was unloaded on to the sailing scow *Florence*, to be towed over the Mosquito Flats to the depot by the old steam launch *Darwin*.

Old Mat Wilson is dead and Lew James and his family have gone to the towns because the trade was taken away from this part by the coming of the motor. The "Maroubra", which brought cargo here, is a wreck in Arnhem Land, and the progeny of Bert Drew's donkeys are running wild and braying over the hills by night.

The "Mirawong", "Chundi" and "Djumindju" tribes who gathered here in the past are but a remnant few around the cattle-stations, and as I travelled up the river I came once more to the Bambarin Gorge with its myths of the Waddaman tribe.

At this place I met an old friend of mine, Tom Quilty, who was putting a road through with some of his native cattle-men. He was the owner of Coolabah cattle-station a few miles to the west, and as I saw them at work on the big red boulders that bestrode the track my thoughts went back to the Waddaman myths and the caves on the red cliffs above, where the paintings of the Lightning Brothers fade with the years as the white strangers grow strong on their tribal lands.

I crossed that large river at its rocky bed, and travelling up Sullivan's Creek we crossed the watershed and paused awhile by the waters of "Ingalladdi" to see once again the Moon painting at that place.

The outlines of the face can be clearly seen, the lines representing the light rays of the moon, the eyes peering above a nose that is just a smear of paint. But instead of a mouth is a large stone phallus<sup>1</sup> to record that on this spot "Djaladbung" (tongue breaker) seduced a woman of the "Native-cat" totem who was his brother's wife. The song-cycles tell how the be-reaved husband discovered his deserted child in the bush and how it died in his arms. And as he cried aloud in his grief Djaladbung took the child, declaring that in three days he would bring it back alive.

True to his word, Djaladbung returned on the third day and placed the live child beside its father's camp-fire. But the child's eyes became stricken with a blight, for the elixir of life was "tulkn" (urine), and over this the brothers fought on Ingalladdi's plain. That fight was fierce, and it only ended when Djaladbung leapt into the sky as the Moon, while his brother sank into the earth as a small earth-worm that lives forever in its mould.

But the "Moon-man"—by his victory—brought reincarnation to the Waddaman tribe, and to commemorate this myth they place their dead in trees so that the Moon, reborn each month, shall reincarnate the dead ones as he did his brother's child in the Dreamtime.

But although the Moon-man gave to the Waddaman and other tribes the cult of reincarnation, he is ever mentioned in legend and song as the "One of incest". Let it be full moon, and the Waddaman women will taunt him as he shows his full face above the trees, declaring that he is "ashamed because he has been sleeping with his mother-in-law", which to them is the worst tribal sin; let him appear as a thin streak in the western sky when being reborn a new moon, then the mothers of the tribe will cover the faces of their sleeping babies because they know that he is "throwing his life-giving tulkn" and should some of it get into the child's eyes he will go blind, as did the first reborn, according to the Dreamtime myth.

After a drink of tea at Ingalladdi we went on across the black soil plains, where the slim nut-wood trees swayed in the breeze to wave us on. We passed Walleroo cattle-station, and our road

<sup>1</sup> Used as a salt-trough when I was there.

went on for another three hundred miles till we finally reached Darwin and the office files.

The old town had altered a lot, but perhaps it was I who was out of step with the times. I wandered around the streets for a while and saw many of the old Karamalal tribal elders, and as I waved them a greeting I just wondered if they were gaining strength as in the past.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### WELFARE

IN THE OFFICE at Darwin I was really glad to be away from the continual bickering over native labour and "blacks camps". I had inspected most of the cattle-stations and all the mission stations in the Territory. Some had made me welcome, others not so, but I knew from experience that hospitality can become a sort of bribe, and I also knew from past days, when I was a "bagman" (traveller with horses), that the only ones who are welcome at the gates of "squatocracy" were those within the social sphere or helpful to the "cause".

As my patrol on the cattle-stations was on behalf of the aborigines and labour conditions, I preferred to camp beneath a shady tree, as I did not wish to be accused of "breaking trust" should my report be an adverse one.

In this thing I may have been wrong, and thinking it over years afterwards I am pretty sure I was. For although I camped on the creek to give the natives confidence that I was there as a friend, I now know that it did the reverse thing by proving me to be "Just nothing . . . only traveller man".

The cattle bosses saw in this a great opportunity of doing some propaganda, and replied to an adverse report by stating that I always camped on the creek to be near the "girls", and that as a result my report was one of bias.

My duty on these patrols was to take a census—the first ever taken by the Branch—and I contacted nineteen hundred aborigines on the two station patrols. I had also to find out about the natives' living conditions. Wherever I went the cattle-men were polite about this, but they ever suspected me of putting some scheme over to deprive them of their native labour.

Very few of the managers could understand that native welfare meant the welfare of the cattle-stations, and that intelligent native labour, well-cared-for and paid a decent wage, would mean contentment. "Who else," I would explain, al-



though they already knew it, "is better adapted for station life than the native people who once hunted on the cattle runs? They know the land, with its waters. It is a part of themselves, and as a result they and theirs are satisfied with their lot."

I explained that I would like to see small native settlements beside each station homestead, homes and amenities for the aboriginal stockmen and their dependants. "Could not," I often asked the managers, "these places be formed beside a head-station garden site, with a white gardener as the supervisor and his wife as nurse to attend to the people's needs? Child endowment could be given . . ."

At the mention of child endowment a startled look always came upon the faces of the managers, as they interrupted, "What!! Give the blacks money . . . it will spoil them."

And thus it ever was with talks about native welfare. So long as one kept on ordinary subjects all was well, but let the conversation get round to a move that might interfere with profits, then the stock answers would come in thick and fast to oppose the scheme.

I always found that this was also the attitude regarding native health. Let an indispensable native worker be stricken with blight which affected his work, then letters would be written about "the unfortunate one's eyesight". But very rarely did they worry about the failing eyesight of a native who was beyond the useful stage of station life.

Everywhere I saw the old humpies of the "blacks", built well away from the main road and thus hidden from view. In them I met many old black men and women I had known in past days, but most of them were what is called "aged and infirm" and could only chant all day and night about the greatness of their tribe. It was terrible to see them in that environment but removing them would only make them pine away and die. When one encounters a thing like this one realizes that Native Welfare is a two-way affair.

The employer of aboriginal labour may well ask: "If the natives desire to live in the open as they have done all their lives, then why build them houses they have no desire to occupy?"—a logic that can only be countered by pointing out that in the past they were nomads whereas today they have been forced into a different environment.

Out of centuries of tradition the aborigines have evolved a fixed plan, and the cattle people say they cannot be blamed if they stuck to the scheme. Many of these established customs which have come down from the past still cling on, and only within the last few years has the custom of taking away the blankets and clothes from the "walkabout" workers ceased. The Government complained that this was just another way of cutting down expense, but the cattle-men argued that the natives wished it that way, claiming the clothes were useless when hunting and only made them sick when they wore them in the rain. From my own personal experience I know who were right, for I have seen many deaths occur on the cattle-stations, caused by natives sleeping in wet clothes beside a camp-fire. Thus out of a custom which arose from expediency came an aspect of native welfare that is frowned upon today.

Analogous to this was another custom of allowing the station dependants to follow the stock-camp during the "cow and calf" muster. To the old people and the children this was a real holiday, and a time of meeting their friends from other cattle-stations. Old hunting grounds would be visited and everyone was happy.

But the practice was abandoned when it was learnt that the Government frowned on it under the belief that this was but a move to get the native women as "ringers" (stockmen) to tail the herd and help about the stock-yard during the branding.

So does native welfare sway between the past and the present, and the only answer to it all is the gradual education of the aborigines into the new conditions of the life that has come upon them. Within the last few years—since I left the Branch—that aspect of native welfare has been stressed, and the Commonwealth Office of Education has schools on every settlement in the Northern Territory, and the youth of the tribes are being educated into our way of life.

This education is essential, for the problem of labour is an ever-present one with the cattle-stations of the Northern Territory. Some cattle-stations in the Centre have tried to overcome it by building cattle-yards around their bores, and by closing the gates of these the cattle muster themselves as they wait to get a drink.

But on the big properties of the scrub-lands and areas where

an abundance of water makes the herds hard to muster, the very economy of the industry depends on aboriginal labour. Many cattle-men try to brush over this lightly during a conversation, but inwardly they are aware of it.

Most of the trouble today is in the fact that the natives have not been taught that it is essential for their own welfare to get out from the settlements where they are provided for, and in which they can still cling to their tribal ritual. And this dislike of venturing forth is aggravated by many employers of native labour, who still live in the past and think of the aborigines in terms of profit and not as people who will assist them.

Native welfare was not always a clash between white people and black people, the aborigines themselves were mixed up in a medley of tribal law that was often difficult to unravel.

In their own tribal disputes you could be fairly certain they had the ability to fix it themselves, but contact in a white environment always made them pause in their actions. Thus did they always go to the Protector for advice; not because he was the "great wise one" who would guide them, but because they could always blame him if he gave a wrong decision and so cause trouble.

In ritual fighting it was very difficult to find who was the actual murderer.

In the "peace-spearing rituals" of the spear-throwing tribes it was laid down that if a man "threw to miss" and accidentally hit his opponent, then it was the wounded man's fault because he got in the way of the spear. But should a person "throw to hit" and accidentally miss his man, then he was guilty of the crime he was "going to commit".

In the "knife fighting" (*bayni kulungu*) where the combatants of the desert tribes place their left arms round each other and have cut for cut with a stone knife held in their right hands, it is laid down that their "Wangalus" (protectors and fathers-in-law) shall stand behind each fighter and so control his actions. But, if one of these is hampered in his work he can give his fighting man the sign he is not "getting a fair go", and that man can drop his knife from the right hand and inflict a mortal blow with the left hand.

All the above is tribal law, but if a man dies as a result, who

then are the murderers? The actual killer with the knife? The "Wangali" who gave him the sign? Or the others who tried to upset the tribal proceedings?

Knowing the customs of a tribe does help a lot, but it is very difficult to get to the background of a people who are ever looking for omens and magic that will direct them. "Blood must be paid for blood" is the law, and failing that a suitable fine of trade goods can be substituted to appease the wrath of a man hit during a ritual fight. Once this "fine" was paid and all was "clear" it was always considered good policy to let the case rest.

But amidst all these rules was the fear of the unknown, a case well exemplified with the trial of a very old aborigine of the "Binbinga" tribe.

Beramudji had killed his older brother because, so he claimed, the dead one had threatened to kill him with a magic poison so that he could get his young wife, Peggy. The case was one of deliberate killing with a spear.

Beramudji's defence was that the "dead one" had sung magic poison, and in self-defence the prisoner had killed him. It appeared that the two old men used to follow the station mustering camp during the "cow and calf" muster, and the young girl Peggy was a useful piece of trade-goods to help them in their daily needs.

Then trouble arose when Beramudji discovered his brother was after Peggy, and during one of their rows the "dead man" had used the threat of the magic poison.

Shortly after this, Beramudji had been stricken with a palsy after eating a meal at the stock-camp, and he immediately diagnosed the complaint as a result of his brother's threat. "I been fright," said the prisoner, "and I been kill him with spear."

He was found "Guilty", with a rider of "Mercy" owing to fear brought about by superstition, and because of his extreme age his sentence was that he be kept away from his tribe for two years.

Soon after the case he died, and I came upon a strange sequel to the case when patrolling the scene of the murder a few years afterwards.

In a mustering camp on the station of the murder I met

Peggy, who was now the wife of the native cook, and smilingly she told me that they had "been sweetheart long time before old man been die". The native cook also poisoned dingoes, which were a menace to the cattle, and as I saw him hand out some food to the old native camp followers I just wondered if he were the one who had handed out the "bait" to Beramudji and so caused the "fear complex" that ended with the killing.

Not long afterwards the native cook died, and hearing the news I again wondered did those old elders know the cause and had they themselves passed judgment on the real murderer.

## "WALKABOUT"

EVERYWHERE WAS CHANGE in the Northern Territory. In the bush the same things were happening as of old, the cattle were mustered and driven to the markets, the farmers and miners still carried on, but the town of Darwin—which to a lot of Territorians is the Territory—was undergoing a spring cleaning. Schemes were in the air for a planned city, and the Native Affairs Branch was having a face-lift to conform to the new order, and instead of the few who worked in it at the beginning with a small "money vote" the personnel of the branch, and the expenses to run the place, had grown to astronomical proportions.

Once more Ted Evans and I went into eastern Arnhem Land, where we lived and patrolled the Cato River with its primitive people, but "the race is only to the young and ambitious". I belonged to the past, so I "pulled out" from the Branch after working with it for over seven years.

I had visions of sitting on a beach, so I went over to Two-fellow Creek on the other side of the harbour, and some natives and I built a hut beside a large banyan tree on the beach. The old shady tree, owing to its proximity to sea and fresh water, had been a great hang-out in the past for the old tribal elders who have since been swallowed up in Darwin. For their own convenience they had made this tree a taboo place, and sitting in its shade I began to realize that taboos and manners have something in common. The aged aboriginals sat under the shady trees, which was their right, not unlike the idea of the young white people standing while the aged, and others of importance, take their seats, and if any seats are left over then the others may use them.

At the banyan tree I lived for a while with my mate Jack Murray, who had also left the Branch, but I am afraid that those who are smitten with wanderlust will always roam. How many people can sit under a shady tree and look out at the

sea for hours at a time, as I have seen the black man do? Few whites have a mind that can become absolutely dormant on all things that worry, and think only of the beauty that surrounds them.

To go on a "properly walkabout" we must leave all our worries and go off to that great reviver, the bush. We must forget what time it is as we enter a timeless land, and go off down some native pad winding through a bushland of mess-mate and woollybutt trees. So I left the banyan hut and the sea, returning to it from time to time as I wandered over the broad face of the old N.T.

My mate Jack and I shot crocodiles on the salt water mangrove arms to the west of Darwin, and there, in those places, I saw the native spearmen help the white man gather the saurians in the glare of a spot-light against the wall of night.

Once more I travelled Arnhem Land, to see the native rituals on the swamp plains of Oenpelli, and again on the Mary River where the aboriginal shooters and their white bosses ride on the flanks of the buffalo herds.

What a strange country is that vast swamp-land facing the Van Diemen Gulf; the herds of buffalo feeding amidst the rice grass, the clouds of water-birds on the red lotus and blue-lily swamps, and the droves of wild pigs black against the green grasses of the plains.

Then in the centre, where the colour of the mountain ranges changes with the temperature and the seasons, the red walls of Glen Helen Gorge with the old station homestead beside the Finke River; the craggy cliffs of Mungaraki, named Mount Crawford after a famous Northern Territory bushman whose grave is in the country he loved so well, and higher up that same River Finke are the limpid pools that lie, cool and clear, under the mountain face of Ormiston Gorge. Standing in that gorge I would look towards Mount Giles glowing like a ruby in the reflected light of the setting sun, and high above me were the ghost gums and pine trees clinging among the edelweiss and ferns to the mountain's craggy face.

A strange land is this Northern Territory. Everywhere is beauty for those who can see it. Everywhere is legend for those who will listen, and all around are a people who are slowly

building up this land into the wonderful place it must eventually become.

My footsteps took me to the Alice, where I worked for a while on a road-grader with my old cobbler Sam Irvine, and together we travelled the Finke at its overflow and eastward into the Simpson Desert at Andado.

But I always returned to the sea and my mates in Darwin, to rest awhile, then back once more to the Alice.

And once I went off with my mate Geoff Moss to Central Mount Wedge. Our route lay north-west through the mulga shrubs and sturdy ironwoods of the red centre and on the first night we camped upon the grey Umberla plain. Next morning, as we boiled the billy for our breakfast, we became entranced as—in the cold frosty air—a mirage came on to the horizon so that the distant blue mountains rose up into the air and came so near to us that we could plainly discern the ravines and trees.

Discussing the strange phenomenon, we were scoffed at by a practical desert tribesman who travelled with us, and he learnedly explained that those things were the work of the "Ngunta fairy folk" who lived in the mountains. Dancing in the cold dawn they—with their magic songs—lifted those hills into the sky and, as the sun rose into the heavens, they lowered them back once more into the tribal lands. And listening to him I realized that poetry and romance was everywhere if we would but stay our rushing around to listen and observe.

Then we moved on our way once more till we came to Central Mount Wedge, and there, with Bill Waudby of that cattle-station, I saw another aspect of life in the opening up of a virgin land.

A new era had begun for those desert people, who came eastward to enjoy the so-called pleasures of civilization, but who were now moving out west once more to re-conquer their tribal lands with the aid of the "white fellow man".



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### "KURANYARRI"

**A**S THE TRIBES came moving in over the years, so did the white settler travel out against that tribal drift. Always they searched for new cattle properties in the waterless areas. Strata was studied, water divining was tried out, and every mood of nature explored to find the permanent waters that could open the dry lands.

Yet these waters had been discovered by the aborigines who chanted the song-cycles that gave directions on how to find them by natural landmarks nearby, while the rock-holes and springs were pointed out to the thirsty hunter by indicators made of small heaps of stones with an upright stone in the centre pointing to the water supply. And such an area was Central Mount Wedge, one hundred and eighty miles north-west of Alice Springs.

This high mountain is known to the desert natives as "Kuranyarrri", for here—long before Warburton discovered it in the early 'seventies—a Culture Hero stood to look down on to the country as he called its place-names.

In 1929 Surveyor J. Driver climbed its sixteen hundred and fifty feet crest to build a stone for his survey work; and afterwards Billy Waudby stood upon it to look down upon the serpent-like Stuart Bluff Range that concealed from him the rock-holes of Pulkakarinya and the flint places of Kumaiba, where primitive man once fashioned his stone knives beside the life-giving spring. And riding back to town, Bill "took up the land" and decided to "give it a go".

Five years later, in 1951, and four years after I had left the Branch, I travelled that way, as the guest of Bill and his wife Pat. And as I travelled over this strange land I began to realize that new countries are only opened by patience and endurance and the ability to realize that you can help the black man as he helps you.

Prior to the coming of Bill this land was known to few. Men

like Bill Bratling and Jim Bullen had ridden that way searching for minerals or grasslands, but the desert people, remembering bitter lessons from the past, always declared to the newcomers that "nothing water longa this land".

This is no tale of finding and digging wells, with hopes running high when the water is fresh and despair when the supply is insufficient or salty. It does not tell of the sorrows and heart-breaks amid the heat, dust and flies, or of the cool nights at the station homestead nestling beneath the quartzite hull of "Ngalyeridja", where the beetling crag "Watgurradidi" of the "Mumandaraba" legend rises sharp against the eastern sky, a reminder to all the tribespeople that over this mountain, according to aboriginal legend, the mighty Rainbow serpent "Woneari" crawled, and leaving his mark behind as a deep saddle between two crests, finally rested at the permanent soak of Ongarra nearby.

This is a tale of the country and its people, of a fifty-mile run to the westward, into strange places that end only on the sand-hills which seem to roll onward to the blue Siddley Mountains to the west of our run.

'Twas early morning as we started with the jeep, and our road was between the mulga trees that grew on the rich red lands. Here and there one could see clumps of wild tobacco growing on the sand patches. Thus we travelled till our track turned into some Queensland bluebush, and there, among some first-class grazing land, was Yarragan well.

Yarragan was the aboriginal name for this native well, which had been newly opened up by Bill and his native helpers, and as I looked down at the fresh-water supply barely fifteen feet below this otherwise waterless land, Bill told me that it took eighteen months of living amidst these Walbri tribesmen before they led him to the sacred well of water; sacred because it was to this soak in a limestone crack that Woneari, the Rainbow serpent of life, crawled into the ground and so caused the water to come forth.

"It's remarkable," said Bill, as he started up a small two-horse-power engine which drove a centrifugal pump that threw out over 3,000 gallons an hour into a blue-bush depression nearby, "how these black people find water and can sink their soaks on the limestone crack to get easy digging for the supply;

a few yards outside the Rainbow trail can mean no water, or ground so tough that it entails much work to reach the supply."

He told me that the limestone fissure is a natural sink down which all the surface water flowed during the "flood off" from the Stuart Bluff Range during the storms, this drainage action naturally formed a depression on the surface of that place, and the aborigines, reasoning thus, found these places and a native well resulted. Bill further explained that it was impossible to sink on the original native well, which was in the drainage depression, for this would fill with water during the storms, so the main shaft was sunk a little distance from the well and a drive put through to the original supply.

Many are the superstitious beliefs attached to these native wells. Not only the taboos resulting from them provided a means of keeping the waters a secret in the past, but certain ritual had to be performed if they were interfered with. The fear that the Rainbow would become displeased with the tribe if their existence were known to others, caused these waters to remain a tribal secret. Even during the sinking of this Yarragan well an elder of the tribe was ever on the alert as the work went on.

Jackari's contribution towards the sinking of the well was not manual but magical, for only by his magic was the serpent kept at bay. He was ever on the move with boomerang at ready and with ritual chants as he peeped into the Rainbow crack for signs of danger. Once when a large whirlwind came roaring towards the well, old Jackari, like Saint George defying the dragon, sprang out in front, and with much shouting and hurling of stones, defied and defeated this whirling thing of dust; for aboriginal mythology records that a whirlwind is the Rainbow Wonegan's watchful head in the sky, and in the tribal lore this is connected to its body creeping beneath the earth in search of unbelievers.

The native helpers who were sinking the well were very proud of Jackari's prowess and often gave him tribute of food and clothing—"danger money" Bill called it—to keep his magical power going at top form.

Bill also told me of a scoffer at the tribal laws, who often declared that "backfellow business little bit silly sometimes". As he held forth one day while sinking at the bottom of the

well, his crowbar plunged through the hard crust of limestone above the water supply, and instantly a loud hissing, caused by air and water pressure below, came from the hole. The scoffer, with a yell that the Rainbow was after him, came out of the well without a ladder and sped away from the danger as Jackari moved in to see what was amiss.

The stories of native wells and Rainbows came to an end with the stopping of the engine, and as we drove on again Bill explained that this line of native wells on the north side of the Stuart Bluff was equidistant from the range, and was possibly formed by a limestone strata outcropping at that distance, with the result that the water in that layer was forced to the surface at these spots.

So do the dry areas of this land yield their secrets to black and white alike, if they have the ability to read the story. "Rinkabeena", "Yungarra", "Yarragan", "Kluwan"—I repeated the names as we travelled along, and their rhythm seemed to hammer into my brain. I only came out of my reverie at Bill's words, "Wake up! We're at Pulkakannya." And there before me was the blood-red range with the markings of the ritual rock-hole.

The markings were taboo signs to warn the women and the uninitiated youths of the tribe, and as we walked towards the red bluffs we passed by some old aboriginal camps fringed with the litter of feasts amid grinding stones and flints, together with small upright stones pointing to the water ahead.

Walking thus for about four hundred yards, we came upon a red quartzite gorge. Guarding its entrance was an enormous wedge-like stone over thirty feet high and balanced on a base barely four by two feet, looking like a giant spear-head driven into the earth beside the cool rock-hole of Pulkakurinya.

The shaded rock-holes of this place are caused by a mountain gully that has eroded its way down the range at this place, and as its rushing waters of the storm-time swept around the red walls of rock or leapt over its ledges the pools were formed.

Paintings of white serpents and emu tracks could be seen faintly drawn on the rock walls, and in many places on the rock ledges—smooth from the bodies of rock-wallabies—we could discern the polished faces and grooves that were made by the elders as they ground their spears and knives on these natural

sharpening surfaces and talked over the day's hunt or ritual matters of the future.

And as we boiled the billy by the cool waters, with the heat waves outside radiating off the hot rock surface, I could imagine the elders of the tribe singing ritual chants as they ate the tit-bits of grubs and yams laid down at the entrance of the taboo spot by the women of the tribe, and "talked up big" about the future of the tribe and the coming of the white man.

Bill's voice broke the silence. "The blackfellows of this part were always dumb when I talked about this spot," he said. "It is marked on the map, and I had heard the story of that upright stone. Then one day Tony Greatorex and I saw a shadow cast by the stone, through a pair of binoculars, and after we found it the native Bank Parapugga, who was with us, could tell us all about its history."

West of Pulkakarinya is the totem-marked claypan of Karinya soak, but no aborigine of that part could tell us why these designs were there. Perhaps they are myth, yet again they may be formed by native children as they play during the cool of the evening.

From here our road led along a salt marsh. Everywhere along its edge for four miles was a series of marker stones interspersed with small rock cairns. Following this "dreaming, or culture heroes" road, we finally came upon a cleared piece of ground with the usual rock cairn and another upright stone pointing to nearby Kumalba (Emu Spring).

The aboriginal gardener of the Waudby's, who goes under the name of One Pound Jimmy, and whose profile is known over the world because his is the head of the only aborigine to appear on a postage stamp, told us that this dreaming place commemorates the legend of the Buk-Buk owl, who came with his two wives from Bigli rock-hole to the north, the stones behind the spring being the native women of the legend.

This Kumalba Spring is crammed with native myth, and well it should be for the setting is weird and grand.

There on our left, symbolical of the culture hero who paused at that spot, was Central Mount Wedge with its layers of pink quartzites slanting ever outwards and upwards to the southern sky. It looked, as we came down the "dreaming stones", not unlike a mighty hon crouching over the igneous dome-like core

of the mountain's base. Over sixteen hundred feet it rises from the mulga and witchetty trees at its base, and three thousand five hundred feet above sea level. As we looked upon it the winds swept around its face with a low droning sound as though the very Earth-mother of the tribes were singing some ritual chant of the Dreamtime.

Then we walked over the few yards to Kumalba Spring, which was only a green slimy well among some rocks and "Ilbilba" tea-trees. No gurgling waters here, just a stinking pool noisy with parrots and desert life, yet it meant life to the desert tribesmen, life amidst the stones and arid salt-pans of the desert.

Over the salt-pans a little distance away some emus stalked, and Bill showed me, behind a small clump of tea-trees that shielded the spring, some flat sand-stones covered with grooves made by the waiting tribesmen as they ground their spears and stones in readiness for the game to come in, and on the same slabs, pecked out with hand-stones, were the engraved circles which Djugadi said were the symbols, the same as the finger-talk of that part, for a woman's breast. "And these," he said, "were the marks of the woman's 'dreaming' this Kumalba."

Little imagination was needed here to picture the scenes of bygone days; the ochred black men blending into the ground on which they rested; the steady grinding of the spears; the chanting of the Kumalba song as they rubbed their hands over the symbolic circles of this woman's dreaming. For the song was a part of their hunting and ritual life as it told how—

"A woman's breast is like the Widaraga tree  
that grows on the sides of Karinya."

On and on goes the rubbing and the chanting, then silence as the game comes in, for out on the salt-marsh sounds the booming noise of the emu as it calls to its mate.

On and on comes the emu, its fear conquered by thirst, and the primitive drama is enacted as the bird crouches to drink. Beside the spring the bushes rustle as the spear comes through and the stricken bird goes down. As it is cooked in the open fire at the camp some distance away the curtain goes up once more, and the show begins anew.

And those who could watch this scene would have seen the desert man at his best, the perfect huntsman who conserved his energy and hunted the creatures around him by using the things that nature, or his tribal heroes, had placed on his ritual lands for use according to the tribal law.

The Stuart Bluff Range with its ritual rock-holes, its Rainbow wells, the rock carvings and Emu-Springs by the salt-marshes, all these things are but part of a pattern of tribal life which records that "True ritual is the will to live". Who can say that the new life beside the Central Mount Wedge cattle-station homestead is not a part of that tribal pattern.

Legend and myth are everywhere in this land, and this to me is strange. When I see the dry lands, the miles that must be walked to gather food, I am filled with amazement at a race of people who can still hunt and yet have the time to people this country with myth and ritual.

I stayed some time with Bill and his wife Pat. I saw the native stockmen with the cattle, and I often talked with old One Pound about the past. The Native Affairs Patrol Officers came and laid down what should be done, but although houses are built the natives still prefer their grass-thatched shelters among the bushes. The native women go about the daily chores, and on the week-end holiday come home full of excitement over the day's hunt.

Native welfare is certainly a two-way affair. The black people have their own opinion about these things, and hearing the native men chant their song-cycles around their camp-fires at night, with the women singing their "Yirapinjus" on the hill-side during the day, I would think of the empty dreamtime paths beyond Kuranyarri. And it was good to know that these native people were working and living in a country that had been plotted by the ritual chants of their forebears.

## THE DESERT PILGRIMS

ONCE, WHEN BILL, his natives and I were erecting a windmill at a new bore site near Karinya soak we saw, from the windmill-head, a mass migration of aborigines coming out of the western desert into the newly settled areas.

They moved *en masse*—not as in the past when they walked and hunted over the country. Over one hundred and thirty came towards us through the low witchetty bush and mulga scrub, on the backs of donkeys and camels discarded by the white people with the advent of the motor-car.

It was morning, and behind them the blue peak of Central Mount Wedge was silhouetted sharply against the sky. Bill, who saw them first and had called aloud that the "desert pilgrims were on the move", had me up the windmill to view the scene. Shortly afterwards they burst out of the timber around us, to halt with surprise at our presence. But they quickly recovered when they recognized some of Bill's natives, and began to talk excitedly as they came close up to see what the queer white people were doing.

They had camped that night, so they told our natives, at Kumaiba Spring, and the seeds of the Anyeru plant that grew around there had given a fair supply of seed for their dampers, whilst the hunters had speared some emus, some of which they were carrying in their wooden carriers.

One old grizzled veteran with matted locks, into which he had fixed gum-nuts, sported one military boot and a grey vest, and as we looked his way he smiled and nodded his head as though he was well pleased with a "get-up" that nearly equalled the "white fellow".

One young girl, who was draped in a lace evening dress that most certainly had come her way by tribal trade route that began with jumble sales into second-hand shops, was patiently sitting on a white donkey which was completely disinterested in its surroundings. The animal had no bridle or saddle and it



just dreamed on as she sat on the tied-up bags of her wardrobe—which was also used as a saddle.

The camel carried a family complete with a large black billy-can (tied to its crupper), and as it grunted under the load the tins rattled and the puppies in the children's arms whimpered with the heat of the day, whilst on another patient donkey was a youth who carried a bundle of spears in the same manner as the knights of old did when at a tourney.

Those quaint animals did not prance about as one will see horses do, they just stood "put" while the old natives told us that they had come from "Arconga side", leaving the place because the white people there had tried to teach their children another type of black people's language. "We are Pinterbi," one of the old men said, "and our language is sweet on our ears. we want our children to be taught the white man's language, so that they can understand things . . . we ourselves will teach them all about our tribal myths."

When they said this they sat down under one of the shady desert-oaks, and I looked upon that motley who were migrating to new fields because they did not want their children to lose the myths of their tribe.

This to me is a strange thing. I have seen missionaries who have learnt some tribal language and who, in order to display an added greatness, have subjected a few hundred people to a language that forever binds them to illiteracy. They could never translate the great books of the world which would give the natives under their care a better understanding of earthly things. As for myself, I would sooner read the Bible in the English version than in some hackneyed form of a tribal tongue, where the translators were bogged down as they tried to explain "sheep" to a people who had never seen them, and "arks", "seas" and "whales" to a desert people who had never come across a fair-sized water-hole in their lives.

I know one "language expert" who had a native woman up in arms when he innocently asked her in the Tewa language how her old man was. The trouble arose when he accidentally mispronounced the word "Yerula" (old man) as "Yeralua" (pubic hair). And a missionary on Groote Eylandt had a hymn "Jesus loves me"; but those primitive natives had difficulty in understanding what he wanted as he tapped his chest so they

gave him the word "Ramorda" (hair on the chest), and this was sung for quite a while until he discovered his mistake.

I have noticed that it is the Christian natives on these isolated language missions who always look down on the real bush tribesmen who are proud of their racial myths, referring to them as "greasy ones" or "sand people", and thus causing a barrier that ever keeps them apart. And it was over this attitude that the Pinterbri elders had decided to migrate to the fresh fields of Yucndumu nearly two hundred miles to the north-east.

One old man, whose face seemed as though it had been carved from the dreamtime, kept looking in the direction they were going and, as I wished to take his photograph, I asked one of the natives to ask if he would take off the military coat and woollen skull-cap he was wearing. They translated my request, and as they did so he gave me a scornful look such as one would expect from a man who had ridden the high winds of tradition all his life.

I offered him some sticks of tobacco as an added incentive. But the laugh was on me, as he walked a few paces away to pull up a few plants of "Ingulba" (desert tobacco), and these he handed to me, with a remark that had the natives in fits of laughter at my discomfiture.

Using our camp site as a sort of assembly ground for the next move onwards, the pilgrims kept coming in with the morning's hunt. One group of youths carried a varied assortment of rabbits and "goannas", while another lot of women had a wooden dish full of cream-coloured witchetty grubs that lay tempting and fleshy against the red background of the carrier.

I asked one of the old men about his tribal country, and as he told me in broken English about the waters and foods of his "good fellow country", I noticed some women and children digging at the red ground beside a mulga tree. Before long they were down into the galleries of the "Yirumba" (desert honey-ant), and I went over to see them at work. As the mothers dug with their wooden digging-sticks in a mixture of earth and honey, the children smacked their lips as the mothers threw out to them the ruby-red orbs of honey jelly that are neatly enclosed in the abdomen of the honey-ant, which is used as the storage place for the worker-ants.

Others, a little distance away, were digging up small yams, and these they ate raw as they went about their task of gathering other food plants.

Here was a country of "plenty food", and yet it looked to me just barren land amid the mulga trees. As I watched them I noticed one of the elders peering down the bore-hole at the water a bare ten feet below. It was midday as he looked, and the sun threw a shaft of light into the hole that mirrored his image so well on the water that he jumped back in amazement. He called aloud to the others to come and see this thing that had been produced by the white men, and soon many were peering into the hole and talking. But I am pretty sure that their wonder was no greater than mine when I saw them digging up food out of, to me, a barren land.

While they were with us the old men kept chanting all the time, and One Pound Jimmy, who was with Bill, told us that they were singing the stories about their homelands to the west. Each song, he told us, was about water or a place of "plenty food", and it was these chants that kept the youth of the tribe informed about such matters.

Then, at a signal I could not understand, they arose and moved off again on their way to the eastward. For hundreds of miles they had travelled towards the contact areas, resting here and there in that long march like the tribes of old, ever moving towards their promised land. I heard one old man singing as he went his way through the bush, and the natives around me said the song was about a great culture hero who traveled with his two wives in the dreamtime. "He made all this land," Jimmy explained. "He made all us blackfellows too . . . one time plenty . . . now nothing."

Well, after the pilgrims had gone into the bush there was, as Jimmy said, "nothing". But Bill and his native helpers were here, and at the station homestead were their wives and families. There was this cattle run on a country that had been deserted by the tribesmen, and not fifty miles away was the Government native settlement of Yuendumu with its school teaching the native children in English.

From where I sit, as I write this, I can see the blue peak of Kuranyarni, where the culture hero of the old desert-man's song rested as he made this land. He called Kumalba and the

spring came forth at his command. He looked over to the east and the ranges of the Stuart Bluff came as a serpent over the land. He looked further on and he made the bluffs of the Emu dreaming, and not far from that symbolic painting of the serpent is the settlement of Yuendumu. He looked south to the "honey-ant" dreaming of "Onapuna" and "Mungeraki" and out of the earth came the places of the Haasts Bluff area.

Then he went to the north and only the song-men of that part know the rest of the story. But the places he made remain, and the old song-man chanted the story to us as he went towards the place where his children's children shall be taught the things of the white man. Everywhere over the Northern Territory the dreamtime centres have become schools, and in them over two thousand full-blooded black children are taught to meet the future.

What that future will be depends on the white people's attitude to the black people who have helped us so much in the past.



### *To the Reader*

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